The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism

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Recently Published

The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism

Edited by

Julia A. Lamm

For Alan and Aidan

Contents

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Preface

Quite self-consciously, this book did not begin with any single definition of mysticism or any common rubric. Those authors who had asked me whether there was a common working definition of "Christian mysticism" were relieved to learn there was none. The contributors are scholars from different disciplinary fields, with different specialities, hailing from different academic, religious, and geographical backgrounds, and as editor I did not want to restrict them in any way. They are the experts, and I wanted to see what definitions would emerge, what questions and debates would take form. And these authors have not disappointed. Each has succeeded in walking that difficult line between, on the one hand, introducing their topics to readers new to the study of Christian mysticism (or to a particular aspect of it) and, on the other hand, engaging other specialists and creatively advancing the scholarly conversation.

Christian mysticism is more a story than it is an identifiable, single phenomenon. In order to tell that story, this Companion moves from the particular to the general and back again; it approaches the subject matter from different vantage points; it pursues continuities while noting departures and innovations; and it considers context and personalities as it weighs ideas and images. The decidedly historical approach of this volume – whereby the middle three Parts (II–IV) are devoted to three major eras in Christianity, each of those subdivided according to smaller lines of influences embedded in particular historical, intellectual, spiritual, linguistic, and geographical contexts – is an inherent challenge to an essentialist approach. At the same time, these mystics and mystical trends are not totally disparate or unrelated but instead constitute trajectories and sub-traditions within the larger Christian tradition itself, with recognizable themes, recurring issues, and noticeable affinities. It is the task, therefore, of the two "bookends" of this volume to consider Christian mysticism as a whole, tracing these "Themes in Christian Mysticism" (Part I) and providing "Critical Perspectives on Mysticism" (Part V). By way of introduction, the first chapter, "A Guide to Christian Mysticism," also takes a wider view of Christian mysticism, beyond a particular time frame or place; it considers the kinds of questions that regularly resurface and discusses four broad characteristics of mystical texts in Christianity.

When I decided to take on this project of editing a volume with over forty authors, many people warned me about the frustrations of such a job. I must say, however, that

my experience has been overwhelmingly positive due to the support and good grace of my publisher, Rebecca Harkin, and the collegiality and professionalism of the authors. I am truly grateful to all of them, both for the pleasure of working with them and for how much they have taught me. I owe a special debt of gratitude to J. Patout Burns and John Peter Kenney, two renowned Augustine scholars, for their willingness to contribute chapters at the eleventh hour, after something else had fallen through.

There are many people who lent advice and help along the way to whom I owe my profound thanks. Bernard McGinn, Patout Burns, and the external readers of the original proposal offered invaluable feedback at early stages of this project, thus helping to shape and fill out the volume; it is a much better volume because they took the time to give detailed critiques. Carole Sargent, Director of Scholarly Publications here at Georgetown University, advised me while drawing up the proposal and then went beyond the call of duty by editing my own contribtion; she is a true asset to this scholarly community and a valued colleague. A colleague in my department, Joseph Murphy, was also generous enough to read a draft of my chapter and offer advice as one whose teaching often touches on mysticism. I have had the good fortune of having access to able and energetic research assistants who helped me track down needed material: Maureen Walsh, Jerusha Lamptey, Sara Singha, Rahel Fischbach, and George Archer.

And finally, my eternal thanks go to my husband, Alan C. Mitchell, and our son, Aidan Gratian Lamm Mitchell, the joy of our life. This volume is dedicated to them. Their love, patience, and laughter sustain me.

CHAPTER 1
A Guide to Christian Mysticism

Julia A. Lamm

Christian mysticism is a variegated landscape, and this chapter will provide a Guide. In it, I help orient the reader by highlighting the main roads and some by-ways, some sign posts, and some description of difficult, fascinating, and (some might say) wild terrain that is Christian mysticism. It is written primarily for students and scholars who, in one sense or another, are new to the study of mysticism: for those completely new to the topic, who have never read mystical texts or specifically Christian mystical texts; for those perhaps familiar with one era or text, but who want to explore others; for those familiar with a text from one perspective or discipline, but who may want to delve into it more deeply as a specifically mystical, religious text; and, finally, for those who teach, or want to teach, some aspect of mysticism, but who are unsure about how to field certain questions.

The point of this Guide is not, therefore, so much to determine and define Christian mysticism as it is to provide tools, reference points, and categories so that readers themselves may explore, determine, define, and judge. I begin with some fundamental issues of definition (what is Christian mysticism?) and classification (who are the mystics? what distinguishes a text or experience as mystical?) and then turn, in the last part of the chapter, to discuss just four of what are countless elements of mystical texts in the Christian tradition and the challenges they present for interpreting those texts (what do you look for in a mystical text? how do you interpret it?). This chapter thus begins with more abstract matters and moves increasingly toward the more concrete. To the degree possible, I resist citing other scholarship on mysticism, which would only direct the reader out to other secondary sources; collectively, the other chapters do that work, offering extensive coverage of the state of scholarship in the field. The point of this Guide is to direct readers to the primary texts and, as further aid, to refer them to relevant discussions in the other chapters, so that the full potential of this volume as a true companion might be realized.

What Is Christian Mysticism?

One thing to bear in mind is the inherently elusive and pluriform nature of Christian mysticism. This is true, of course, of any "-ism," but it is inherently true of mysticism, which defies and resists stagnation, reification, or essentialism. There is not one kind of Christian mysticism, which makes definition so difficult. Nonetheless, definitions are important for orientation, and so that is where we begin.

As several chapters in this volume note, the term "mysticism" (and its cognates in other languages) is a modern construct that scholars have employed in order to identify, explain, and categorize certain perceived ways of being religious or expressing religiosity. Sometimes "mysticism" or "mystic" has been used as a weapon to stigmatize, other times as an accolade. To recognize the term "mysticism" as a construct is not, however, to concede that it is entirely arbitrary. Its roots go back to the more ancient Greek terms "mystery" (*mysterion*) and "mystical" (*mystikos*),[1] both of which are found in early Christian texts, although whether they are scriptural is another matter.[2] Still, remembering that "mysticism" is a modern construction does serve to caution that we need to take care in defining and applying the term. For just as what we call "Christian mysticism" has a history, so too does the study of mysticism: each of the many definitions of mysticism proffered since the seventeenth century carries with it particular associations and attitudes born of particular historical contexts, replete with their own polemics and prejudices. Since several of the chapters that follow present the history and problem of definition in detail, I will not rehearse that here.[3] It may be instructive, however, to have some definitions close at hand and to provide a brief outline of that history in order to underscore how attitudes shift and also to help orient readers regarding current debates concerning the study of Christian mysticism.

In the French context, Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) traced *la mystique* back to the early seventeenth century, arguing that the term emerged precisely with the modern world and its sense of loss of, and nostalgia for, the presence of God.[4] At the same time, it was also used as a way of delegitimizing and thus marginalizing certain religious movements and what came to be known as Quietism. In the Anglo-American context, the designation *mysticism* was coined in the mid-eighteenth century and was used pejoratively, as a kind of shorthand by Enlightenment figures to identify false religion and thus to dismiss individuals and sects deemed to be fanatical, or simply crazy.[5] Similarly, in the late eighteenth century, German Enlightenment philosophers (most notably Immanuel Kant) used *der Mystizismus* in a strongly negative sense. With some exceptions, this continued into the nineteenth century, with Protestant scholars often using *die Mystik* or *der Mystizismus* polemically as derogatory designations for Catholicism and Pietism.

Usages and attitudes began to shift around the turn of the twentieth century, in large part due to the works of William James (1842–1910) and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941).[6] Protestant scholars of religion began to view "mysticism" as a useful, and more positive, tool to define certain "types" of religious experience.[7] Some also saw "mysticism" as a way of getting at something they took to be universal in the human spirit and common to many religions. In Catholic thought, due in part to a reaction within

Catholicism against rationalism, "mysticism" was at once a way to name the movement to reintegrate academic theology and prayer and a way to canonize academically those authorities already canonized as saints.

The study of Christian mysticism underwent another significant shift beginning in the 1980s, when in the fields of history, literature and theology there was more interest in social history, a push to expand the canon (or challenge the very notion of canon), and increasing emphasis on the local – on particular geographical, historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. This shift both inspired and was inspired by careful textual work, the result being new critical editions and translations of primary texts deemed mystical. New scholarship inspired by feminist critique, literary criticism, deconstruction, and post-modern sensibilities challenged the confessional stances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many mystics came to be appreciated as inhabiting the periphery of Christian thought and spirituality, or even the territories beyond, and have come to be celebrated as being heterodox or heretical. In short, the student of Christian mysticism needs to be aware, at the very least, of his or her own assumptions of what makes a text a *mystical* text, and what attitude or valuation is attached to that.

At present mysticism appears to be enjoying a more positive status than in the past, although it still has its detractors. Rather than being a tool of inter- and intra-denominational polemics within Christianity, it is appealed to as a resource for overcoming such polemics. Similarly, it has also provided a fruitful avenue to pursue interreligious dialogue[8] and has produced a growing sub-field for interdisciplinary studies, as this volume demonstrates. At the popular level, the topic of mysticism seems also to have struck a chord, perhaps because of the well-documented trend away from traditional, institutional religions. Yet it is fair to ask whether the danger now is that it has become too commonplace, almost to the point where "mystical" functions as a substitute for "religious" or "spiritual." What some would call simply "religion," "piety," or "faith" others call "mysticism."

Arguably the most influential, because most cited, definition in the field at the present time is Bernard McGinn's. His scholarship on Christian mysticism (a multi-volume work, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, translations and countless articles, and his having trained a generation of scholars at the University of Chicago) has shaped the field enormously. McGinn defines Christian mysticism "a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it" (1998: 26). Understanding some of the choices he has made with this definition – what it excludes as much as what it includes – can help us get a sense, at least, of the status of current debates.

Let us consider just three of McGinn's decisions. First, *consciousness*. McGinn explains that he chooses "consciousness" over the oft-used "experience" because the latter is too ambiguous and tends to emphasize discrete experiences. While not wanting to eliminate "experience" altogether, McGinn does want to challenge an over-emphasis on separated and paranormal experiences, emphasizing instead sustained processes and bringing to the fore "forms of language" (1991: xviii). He could also be influenced here by the deep suspicion many scholars of religion have about the appeal to experience: they read it as an attempt to seal off a part of oneself from scientific scrutiny. Second, *presence*. Here McGinn explicitly takes his cue from a particular passage by Teresa of

Avila (1515–1582),[9] which he thinks captures what so many Christian mystics are trying to get at. He is also likely trying to correct the tendency of many scholars who are attracted to some Christian mystics' compelling descriptions of *absence*, a concept that has deep resonance in a post-modern world. While much mystical language about absence is indeed existentially powerful and poetically stirring, for the Christian mystic the consciousness of divine absence is always related to consciousness of divine presence. Third, *transformation.* With this, again, McGinn resists previous tendencies to view mysticism as connected to isolated, irrational, or paranormal events. He points instead to a transformative process and sustained way of living that is at once moral, intellectual, and spiritual. In all of this, it is important to remember that McGinn sees his own definition as heuristic description, and he is clear in pointing out that – while certainly informed by larger debates in the fields of religious studies, philosophy, and the social sciences – it has taken particular shape inductively, from his close reading of Christian texts.

Many chapters in this volume explicitly employ McGinn's definition, thereby demonstrating how capacious and illuminating it can be.[10] Many others, however, offer their own definitions. I glean just some of these from various chapters below in order to underscore the importance, difficulty, and provisional nature of the act of defining something that, almost by its very nature, resists definition. These examples were not necessarily intended to be formal definitions, but could arguably function as such; each arises from the particularities of the assigned topic. This should serve, too, to remind us that the process of defining, especially defining something as huge as Christian mysticism, requires a continual movement between the particular and the more general. Having several working definitions in mind, the reader might then approach the subject matter with some confidence – enough perhaps to refine those definitions. In my own discussion, I intentionally alternate among many definitions and terms – for example, referring to consciousness, experience, encounter, knowledge, etc. – thus highlighting the pluriform nature of our subject matter.

Barbara Newman, in "Gender," describes mysticism as "a quest for experiential union with God," which "seeks to transcend all categories of human thought, including sex and gender."[11] Michael Cusato, in his chapter on the Spiritual Franciscans, writes, "This spiritual understanding was not of an intellectual order (one of superior intelligence) but rather of an intimate, fuller and more immediate experience of God – hence, the connection to mysticism."[12] Finally, George Demacopolous, reminding us of differences between the Latin western traditions and Greek eastern traditions, explains that the term *mysticism* refers "to the relevant categories of thought that capture the Byzantine understanding of the mystery or, perhaps more properly, the 'hidden mystery' of divine/human communion."[13] And last, to round out these definitions, I cite that offered by David B. Perrin in his chapter, "Mysticism," for the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*: "[T]he radical surrender of self to the loving embrace of the Other who is at the foundation of all life, the One to whom we owe our very existence . . . Thus, to enter into the depth of the human experience known as mysticism is to enter into the story of the passionate love affair between humanity and the divine. This outpouring of love has resulted in the transformation of individuals, society, and the church in many different ways" (443).

Who Are the Mystics?

Most of the mystics discussed in this volume would not have recognized or appreciated this designation for themselves, and some would likely be disconcerted to see with whom modern scholars have grouped them. Furthermore, it is only very recently that certain major religious figures – such as Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), Martin Luther (1483–1546), or John Calvin (1509–1564) – have been, in a qualified way, ranked among Christian mystics; hence, some authors in this volume have had to problematize the issue.[14] This only underscores the fact that attitudes and definitions of mysticism shift with the time. So who are the mystics?

Mystical authors

In studying Christian mysticism, we must rely inevitably, albeit not exclusively, on texts. As Douglas Anderson from the perspective of neuroscience and Ralph Hood and Zhuo Chen from the perspective of the social sciences demonstrate in Part V, the study of human subjects themselves is a necessary part of the modern scientific approach.[15] Even these studies, however, are deeply informed by the reading of texts: self-reports, secondary observations, classical texts, and theoretical formulations. In short, our primary access to Christian mystics, hence to something more abstract called Christian mysticism, is through texts – primarily the mystical texts written or dictated by some Christians known (at least by some) for dedicated lives of prayer, virtue, and service, which drew them into some kind of intense, intimate, and immediate relationship with God, a relationship that in turn became defining for their lives and inspirational for others.

So what is a mystical text? Most hagiographies, prayer manuals, religious autobiographies, devotional writings are not mystical texts – but some are. Teresa of Avila's *Life,* for instance, is full of accounts of various paranormal states and occurrences, yet it is her more systematized *The Interior Castle*, which tends to downplay these things, that has become a recognized classic of Christian mysticism. Sometimes a mystical "text" may constitute only a few passages within a much larger text. So, to offer another example, Augustine of Hippo's (354–430) autobiographical *Confessions* is not usually considered a mystical text, although it does contain relatively brief descriptions of two mystical ascents that proved to be hugely influential in the course of Christian mysticism in the west.[16] In such cases, a pertinent question becomes, how do mystical accents affect our interpretation of a work (or a body of work) and our understanding of the author?

Our unavoidable dependence on texts raises several problems. First and foremost is the problem of what we might call religious elitism. Most of the mystical texts discussed in this volume are either established classics in the history of Christian thought and spirituality, or they arguably should be. These texts are not mere jottings of unusual occurrences, but are, rather, sustained discussions of what it is to know and love God in a mystical way and what that means for how the author lives out her or his Christian

life. They are also highly stylized texts that display intellectual, psychological, and literary sophistication and power; this is true even of those texts written (or dictated) by authors claiming to be "unlettered." Although "stylized" in one sense, many mystical texts are also noteworthy because they were so novel in their day, even though novelty was often viewed with suspicion more than laud, not just by institutional religious authorities but also by the mystics themselves. Mystical authors often shake older conventions and break new ground in their style of writing as well as in their development of ideas, metaphors, and techniques. And yet, at the same time, they can be distinctly expressive of their time and situation.

So it seems that in studying Christian mysticism we are studying an elite minority of Christians: those who had what are assumed to be rare experiences; who had them intensely and often enough to have had something meaningful to say about them; and, finally, who had talent and insight enough to have written them out in a form that would be so valued as to be treasured, copied, handed-down, and protected (or so dangerous as to be rooted out, destroyed or suppressed). In short, more questions arise: If we are indeed dealing here with an elite minority, what can they possibly tell us about the larger religious tradition and its silent majority? Are mystical authors exceptional, in the sense that they are exceptions to the rule or are so superior to average Christians as to be a breed apart?

While mystical authors may indeed represent an extremely small, elite minority (given the rhetorical and authorial genius of these writers), this is not necessarily to say that mystics were rare or unusual in the history of Christianity. Indeed, it can only be assumed that there were (are) more mystics than mystical authors. As possible evidence for this, let me offer several examples from different time periods.

In early Christianity, before the separation of exegetical and theological reflection from the spiritual life, authors of mystical texts that became classics were surrounded by fellow Christians learning how to interpret scripture as a part of their religious formation. At the beginning of the third century, for example, Origen (184/5–253/4) was a renowned spiritual guide and charismatic leader who dared to stay in Alexandria, as leader of the Christian school there, during flare-ups of persecution when the church clergy had fled. There is no reason to doubt that among Origen's circles of students and spiritual charges, as they read scripture with him using his methods, were several who experienced the kind of transformative and inner appropriation of Scriptural texts that Origen had called for – in other words, some kind of mystical experience.[17]

Likewise, in the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395), so significant for the early development of Christian mysticism and the apophatic tradition,[18] had insisted that his older sister Macrina was both sister and teacher. A generation later, Jerome (c. 347–420) read scripture with Paula and other women who were also versed and learned in exegesis, languages, and doctrine, although they did not leave behind written treatises (at least not that we know of) since, as Peter Brown points out, writing was deemed a male occupation (366–371). There is, furthermore, the paradigmatic event – a mystical ascent and ecstatic experience – in the garden in Ostia shared by both Augustine and his mother, Monica; later, as a bishop, Augustine was determined to lead his congregation, educated and uneducated alike, to "mystical foreshadowings of their heavenly goal."[19]

In short, these early mystical authors (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine), towering figures that they were, did not write in isolation but were parts of communities, both larger communities worshiping together and also more intimate circles of Christians wanting to live out the Christian life in a committed, reflective manner. It is also worth noting the active presence of women in some of these circles; although no mystical texts by the pens of women that we know of exist from these early centuries,[20] this does not mean that they, or other Christians now anonymous to us, did not have (or did not desire to have) such experiences.

In the thirteenth century, with the explosion of itinerant preaching and what McGinn has termed "the new mysticism" (1998), an interesting shift occurred that would take even firmer hold in the late medieval, early modern, and then modern periods. As we have seen, in early Christianity mystical authors were often, although not exclusively, recognized religious leaders, and while there were communities around them, the relationship between mystical author and community was still mostly vertical. With growing literacy in the thirteenth century, the growth of towns and the merchant class, and consequently with the development of vernacular theologies, the relation between many mystical authors and their circles became more lateral in nature. This again serves to remind us that these texts were not written in isolation but for a certain readership; even though we may not be able to reconstruct those audiences as fully as we might like, attention to "particular textual culture[s]" (as Denis Renevey puts it) is imperative.[21] Furthermore, this more lateral type of relationship between mystical author and audience or readership suggests a dynamic process of the production, reception, and consumption of mystical texts. This in turn suggests that there were numerous people interested in such mystical experiences. This was certainly the case going into the modern era. The Ignatian and Salesian traditions, for instance, both explicitly addressed the desire of the laity for deepening their practices of prayer and meditation.[22]

The basic fact of the anonymity of so many mystics or would-be mystics ought not be forgotten, even if we cannot escape it. As Paul Gavrilyuk illustrates with the case of the Jesus Prayer in the eastern Orthodox tradition, there have also been communities comprised of countless practitioners of certain mystical prayers and practices that will always remain unknown to us.[23] In the east there was much less a sense than in the Latin west that an individual could stand out as a mystic, with the inner cartography of the soul laid bare for others to examine. In her chapter (34), "Mystics of the Twentieth Century," Mary Frohlich offers poignant examples of how two mystics might never have been recognized as such. We might not know of the visions of Nicholas Black Elk (1863–1950), who came out of an oral tradition, had a poet not interviewed him and published them; even so, we are left with the difficult interpretive issues of how well that poet understood Black Elk and of what he decided to leave out of the published version. Similarly, we might never have known of the extended mystical reflections of the international diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), had his journal not been found after his death.

In summary, when asking "who are the Christian mystics?" and realizing we are largely restricted to the texts that some of them wrote, we would do well to proceed with caution by recognizing how limited the historical record is and acknowledging

that the texts we do have were products as much as they were causes. In other words, however influential these texts have proven to be, they were themselves inspired by, and responses to, needs and aspirations of their day.

"Everyday" mystics

Another question arises. Even if we acknowledge and agree that mystical authors were parts of communities that either lived or sought to live a life of contemplative prayer and practice that may fairly be considered mystical, that still does not address the question of whether we are talking about an elite minority of Christians. Is mystical experience an eccentric expression of Christian spirituality and piety, or does it capture and express something integral to the Christian life? And if the latter, can only a few exemplify that? In some cases, the mystical authors discussed in this volume do seem to express an extreme, or at the very least ideal, form of Christian life very difficult to imagine for the majority of people having to earn a living, feed a family, and otherwise make their way in the world. There is a reason why the contemplative life was once thought to be possible only in a cloistered community. In other cases, there are mystical authors who were very much on the margins, or even pushed beyond the boundaries, of Christianity.[24]

Scholars of mysticism have debated this issue,[25] and the mystical authors discussed in this volume would also likely disagree on whether mystical experience of God is or should be the goal for every Christian or just for the few – or, for that matter, whether it should be a goal at all in this life. It is an important question, the answer to which will reveal much about one's understanding of mysticism and attitude towards it. It might be helpful to begin with a succinct discussion of the matter by Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904–1984), twentieth-century theologian.[26] His own answer is quite clear: there are everyday mystics. Yet how he frames the issue is helpful, for in a matter of two pages he captures the tensions inherent in the issue.

In a piece entitled "Everyday Mysticism," Rahner rejected the notion of mystical experience "as a single and rare exceptional case in individual human beings and Christians which is granted to the latter either by psycho-technical effort or by a special grace of God as a rare privilege or by both together, without really having any constitutive importance for the actually way to perfect salvation" (69). Christianity, he insisted, "rejects such an elitist interpretation of life" (69). Rahner instead regarded the "mystical experience of transcendence at least as a paradigmatic elucidation of what happens in faith, hope, and love on the Christian path to the perfection of salvation wherever salvation in the Christian sense is attained" (69). At the same time, Rahner conceded the phenomenon that some seem more advanced at least psychologically, but that theologically it must be granted an "exemplary function" (70).

The difference could rest in how "mystical experience of transcendence" is interpreted, but for many others mystical knowledge or mystical union is considered rare. Let me offer examples of three types of elitist attitudes: institutional, individual exceptionalism, and counter-institutional. A classic example of the first kind is the Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century),[27] who, in addressing his *The Mystical Theology* to a certain

Timothy, warns that "none of this [should come] to the hearing of the uninformed" (136). Most people, he thought, remained within the lower realms of metaphor in their knowledge of and ability to name God; only a few can rise to those higher levels (intellectually, spiritually, and morally), and even fewer of those who do ascend to those higher affirmations are capable of making the final negation necessary to become one with God. These become the ecclesiastical "hierarchs," who mediate divine mysteries through administering the Christian rites.

The thirteenth-century beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp also took an elitist attitude, although from a notably different perspective from that of Dionysius. Hadewijch, who at one point evidently held a position of spiritual leadership in a beguine community but was then exiled from that community, advised a younger beguine that she is still too young and does not yet know the pain of following Christ. Hadewijch's intimacy with God morphed into a kind of exceptionalism when she expressed, after having experienced a union with St. Augustine (who, as bishop, would have been one of Dionysius' hierarchs), dissatisfaction. She wanted God alone for herself because God wanted her: "For I wished to remain in his deepest abyss, alone in fruition. And I understood that, since my childhood, God had drawn me to himself alone, far from all the other beings whom he welcomes to himself in other manners" (290). She did not deny that the saints of the church "enter within God," but she continued to stress the ferocity, depth, and difficulty of her own way. Her expression of mystical elitism thus had to do with assertions of her own uniqueness in relation to God – an individual's exceptionalism.

Finally, Marguerite Porete (d. 1310),[28] another beguine, also held an elitist view, although from yet another angle. She distinguished between "Holy Church the Little . . . who is governed by Reason" (by which she means, in part, the institutional, hierarchical church) and "Holy Church the Great . . . who is governed by [Divine Love]" (101) (made up of the simple, annihilated souls). These simple souls are numerous but are invisible to the eyes of "Reason" (the visible church), not only because Reason cannot see clearly enough but also because such souls are "annihilated by humility" and so are "less than nothing" (89). Yet, however numerous they might be, they are far beyond the "common folk" (94), who are at best at the first of seven stages or states. In all three of these examples, however, it needs to be pointed out that, while each thinks that mystical union (however each describes it) is rare and for an elite few, they are clear that salvation itself is not so restricted.

Distinguishing Characteristics of a Mystical Text

Sandra M. Schneiders distinguishes the field of Christian spirituality from Christian theology in the following way: "All theology is an investigation of experientially rooted *faith*. The distinguishing characteristic, or formal object, of spirituality as a field of study is its specific focus on Christian faith as the *experience* of the concrete believing subject(s). In other words, spirituality studies not simply Christian faith but the lived experience of Christian faith" (17). This emphasis on "lived experience" would certainly suggest mysticism is a particular form of spirituality, but what exactly is the

difference? What marks a text a mystical text, as opposed to a religious, moral, or inspirational text?

In the broadest terms, I suggest there are at least four distinguishing characteristics of mystical texts in the Christian tradition. To discuss each one in full would require a chapter or even a book. For the purpose of this Guide, a brief consideration of these characteristics will help cue the reader about some kinds of things to look for, notice, and weigh. The trick here will be to balance the general (the broad characteristics) and the particular (the many kinds of images and techniques used by different mystics or definitive for particular eras and schools), so I offer some examples and some trends. Although certain themes do recur throughout the centuries of Christianity, mystical authors can vary greatly, and how a particular mystic develops a certain theme is determined by their own experience as that was shaped by the wider context of their culture and time. It is important to keep in mind that mystical authors and the mystical experiences about which they write can be situated at very different places on any number of spectrums at once: they can range from the more affective to the more intellectual, from the apophatic to the cataphatic, from the taciturn to the loquacious, from emphasizing stillness to insisting on action, and from discouraging images to offering an over-abundance of them. And just as often, mystical authors seek to hold two opposing impulses together.

In what follows, the emphasis is on texts, with the recognition, however, that many of these texts originated in oral and communal practices of preaching, teaching, conversing, performing, advising, and participating in rituals and liturgies. In other words, often the original audiences these mystical authors had in mind were not just readers but also listeners and spectators.

Mystical discourse challenges any static, rote, or merely "exterior" understanding of God

Mysticism is iconoclastic, rejecting the impulse to make God into one object (or subject) among many. It is not, however, iconoclastic in the sense that it rejects all images; on the contrary, Christian mystics draw on the images and motifs of the tradition, exploring and re-presenting them so as to rejuvenate them. Although some mystical texts might delineate stages or particular approaches, in the end they resist formalism. For the mystic, relinquishing a more "exterior" understanding of God and moving toward a "deeper" or more "interior" knowledge of God requires some kind of initial recognition of the limits and illusory nature of our ideas and of our attachment to these ideas, whether these ideas be explicitly religious or whether they have to do other ways of ordering our lives.

How does a text enjoin the reader to move beyond a mere exterior or rote knowledge of God to something else? Through prayer (see below on "Mystical Prayer"). And also, traditionally, the first "stage" of mystical knowledge called for *purgation* or *purification*, which included penance, humility, and certain ascetical practices. While the notion of purification has drawn criticism – for the pretense of there being "stages" of progression, for being world- or body-denying, and for encouraging extreme asceticism – it need not be reduced to these. For instance, around the turn of the fourteenth century,

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1327) criticized a "mercantile spirituality"[29]; at the turn of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) called on his friends, the "cultured despisers of religion," to let go of their fixed ideas and their attempt to impose their own order on the universe, and he dismissed the bourgeoisie for reducing religion to moral conformity; and more recently, Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003) has pointed to the need to tear "the veil of triviality."[30] Purgation can thus be seen as a rejection of one's own self-centeredness and trivial attachments.

The very language of "exterior" and "interior" has also drawn criticism because, if taken literally, these spatial metaphors suggest that mysticism has to do with privatization and individualization.[31] Yet in Christian mysticism this movement towards a more interior way of knowing God almost always involves a redirecting and opening of oneself in relation to the other: toward neighbor, universe, and God. Furthermore, given its anti-formalism, Christian mysticism has often been associated with reform movements within the church.[32] While in retrospect many Christian mystics have been hailed as saints or prophets, the more prominent and vocal among them were often deemed problematic by institutional and established religious authorities of their day. Christian mysticism can, in other words, have decidedly political ramifications.

Need a call to relinquish an "exterior" or rote understanding of God, however, be specifically mystical? Could it not simply be a call to be more "religious" or "spiritual"? One way to judge this distinction is to consider the imagery used and the methods counselled. In mystical texts, often coupled with directional metaphors (exterior, interior, up, down, in, out, higher, deeper) are images of ways in which the soul moves (ascending, descending, spiralling, circling, withdrawing inward, extending outward, falling, rising, contracting, expanding, etc.),[33] which are made further complex by images for how God moves in relation to the soul (entering or filling, drawing or raising, embracing or retreating, etc.). Alternatively, a text may stress a more apophatic approach of stillness and imageless prayer, or yet may combine calls for stillness and for movement. All such language serves to destabilize and re-situate the reader's spiritual space and stance.

In being asked to relinquish familiar space/stance, readers are asked to enter and move within (or through) another kind of space. Those other kinds of spaces are sometimes described in terms of common religious metaphors, but the mystic, unlike other kinds of religious writers, will do something different with that metaphor. So, for Dionysius and others, Moses' ascent up the mountain becomes the soul's ascent to God, and Moses' movements become the stages of mystical preparation and ascent. For Teresa of Avila, the soul is a castle with several mansions, with Christ dwelling in the central (bridal) chamber; the invitation to the reader is to enter the castle and move in, through and among those rooms and mansions to the degree possible.[34] Another example of a kind of mystical space is that of Christ's wounds becoming a place of refuge and his side wound "a fair and delectable place" (Julian of Norwich 220).[35] Finally, Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercises* counsels, first, "indifference," and then the composition of place, in which the retreatant vividly imagines a scene (e.g., from the Gospels) and places him- or herself within the scene.[36]

Mystical authors also, however, introduce new imagery and techniques in order to displace and destabilize readers, attracting them to a new space or perspective and

thereby drawing them out of complacency. For example, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) used an icon of Christ's face in which the eyes appear to follow the beholder's movements, and he encouraged monks to perform an experiment meant to induce wonderment.[37] Hadewijch invoked the image of exile, insisting that Christ cannot really be known until the believer herself loses everything and experiences what Christ experienced in his humanity: rejection, loneliness, and no place of belonging. And Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (1881–1955), palaeontologist and geologist, read the soul as a microcosm of earth and universe: "And I allowed my consciousness to sweep back to the farthest limit of my body, to ascertain whether I might not extend outside myself. I stepped down into the most hidden depths of my being, lamp in hand and ears alert, to discover whether, in the deepest recesses of the blackness within me, I might not see the glint of the waters of the current that flows on, whether I might not hear the murmur of their mysterious waters that rise from the uttermost depths and will burst forth no [one] knows where. With terror and intoxicating emotion, I realized that my own poor trifling existence was one with the immensity of all that is and all that is still in process of becoming" (25).

This first characteristic, while often portrayed as an initial phase, is actually part of an ongoing process, since the temptation to stay fixed or become comfortable in one's awareness of God is always there. There remains the question: a movement from an exterior knowledge to what? What kind of knowledge is given or gained in the course of the movements or the stillness, in this different "space" or stance?

Mystical texts engage their readers by describing a more immediate, intense, and transforming relationship with the living God

There are three parts to this: the nature of God, the nature of the mystical relationship to God, and the nature of an engaging text. Let us begin with the God of the Christian mystics, the God who is love (1 John 4). No matter how abstract mystical language becomes – whether Pseudo-Dionysius' "darkness of unknowing" (137), Hadewijch of Antwerp's "whirlpool" (267, 289), Eckhart's "ground,"[38] or Teilhard's "Omega point"[39] – the God described by Christian mystics is a personal God, who seeks to communicate God's very self and who, even when revealed as abysmal and terrifying, is to be trusted and loved.[40] Even when Christian mysticism tends towards a kind of nature mysticism, there is still a sense of nature and the universe as permeated with goodness and as revelatory of divine activity. Because this God of Christian mystics is understood to be the living God who is love, mystical knowing is not separated from loving, and descriptions of the mystical encounter with (consciousness of, surrender to) God usually involves some kind of intimate relation that is affective, immediate, and transforming. For the Christian mystic, such transformation only occurs by grace – that is to say, by a gift of God. However differently Christian mystics may describe the mystical encounter with God, certain notes regularly surface: desire, longing, joy, wonder, delight, ecstasy, and peace.

The immediacy can be expressed in various ways. Sometimes it means unmediated in the sense of not involving usual forms of the meditation of grace in Christianity. So,

for instance, Julian of Norwich (c. 1343–c. 1416) is very clear when she describes how she received her first *Showing* (revelation): "I perceived, truly and powerfully, that it was he who just so, both God and man, himself suffered for me, who showed it to me *without any intermediary*" (181, emphases added). Sometimes it is described as a permeating sense of warmth, sweetness, and tranquility. And sometimes the immediacy is described in terms of the engagement of the full range of the so-called spiritual senses: "seeing" God, but also "tasting," "smelling," "touching," and "hearing" God.[41]

Or it may be described as a type of ecstatic knowing, whether as a knowing beyond knowing (*excessus mentis*); as a reception of divine mysteries, such when Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) reported having been given special, unified knowledge of scripture; as a crystalline insight that becomes a hermeneutical key for understanding other mysteries; or as a super-saturation. Something to be attuned to here is the relationship between the intellectual and the affective, and whether one is subsumed into the other (usually the former into the latter) or is abandoned altogether.

Very often, but by no means always, the immediacy is described in terms of some kind of union with God. Whereas other religious or theological texts might refer to union or communion with God, *mystical texts* explore, develop, and press analogies in order to evoke a sense of what that is actually like, with the aim of eliciting in the reader the desire needed to pursue or undergo it. This appeal is an attempt to address and transform the whole person: intellect, affections, emotions, will, body, and actions. In all these senses, mystical texts have an existential quality about them.

Different mystical authors describe quite diverse types of mystical union, and even one and the same mystic may describe wildly different experiences of mystical union with God. Common metaphors include the iron in the fire, a drop of water in the sea, or some aspect of the heart in order to describe how the soul can become one with God without either losing its identity. Also common are metaphors drawn from personal, intimate human relationships, for instance that of bride and bridegroom, or mother and child. Erotic imagery – especially as it becomes more erotic, but even when it is rather staid – can capture the intensity of the passion, the intimacy of the union, the sheer delight in the relationship, and the relational quality of the agency.[42] Maternal imagery can also convey the tender, affective dimension as it entertains other forms of union: being enclosed in God as in a womb, being fed and nourished by Christ's body as though nursing at a mother's breast. Yet other images of union are cosmic in scope. The imagery of the union depends greatly on whether the mystical author is describing a union with the Godhead, with God specifically as Trinity (and therefore as being drawn into the inner life of the Trinity), with a particular "Person" of the Trinity, and if with Christ whether the emphasis is on the human or divine nature.

Some mystics push the imagery further, insisting the mystical union with God is so complete that the soul's distinction and identity cannot be kept intact. Hence some mystics describe a kind of union of either identity or indistinction, and yet others describe an annihilation of the soul. Here, especially, mystics tread on dangerous ground, since their ideas seem incompatible with central Christian doctrines (e.g., the sinfulness of the human will) and with Christian morality.[43]

While mystical consciousness of (encounter with, experience of, union with) God can occur in a flash in a discrete moment of time, *mystical texts* usually describe some

kind of process in which the self as it had been constituted is deconstructed, dissolved, or undone, only then to be recreated, reintegrated, or reconstituted in God. Again, how this is described can vary greatly – again, even by one and the same mystic. One dominant theme is that of a mystical journey complete with an itinerary. Here, a telling question is whether the itinerary is descriptive or prescriptive. Some mystical texts follow a more formulaic pattern, for instance those informed by a neo-Platonic worldview, and so the mystical progression is an ascent through purgation to illumination and perfection.[44] Within this basic pattern, however, there is considerable room for innovation and expansion.[45] Other itineraries appear to be more descriptive of a particular mystic's own, and sometimes quite idiosyncratic, experience. For instance, Angela of Foligno's (c. 1248–1309) thirty steps are so unique to her own experience, and so convoluted, that her scribe tried to simplify and streamline them by reducing them to twenty plus seven supplementary steps.[46]

Alternatively, other texts may undermine the very idea of there being prescribed steps or steady progress. Take, for example, Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, where the itinerary really begins beyond where most Christian are and which contains in a sense simultaneous itineraries (of three "deaths" and seven "stages") that do not always seem to coincide. Is this an attempt to weed out those who are not "simple" enough, or an attempt to destabilize (an apophatic move) that points to the transcendence of "Fine Love"?

Mystical texts explore the fundamental paradox of how two incommensurable "things" can come into immediate relation and how what is indescribable can be described

Mystical authors draw from experience to develop certain literary techniques to help capture such paradoxes; foremost among these are the language of boundaries and that of the coincidence of opposites.[47] The mystical encounter with God (whether that be mystical knowledge, love, consciousness, union, rapture, etc.) is often described in terms of plunging, ascending beyond, breaking through, crossing, dying, being transported, entering into, flowing into and out of, penetrating, being exiled, etc. The matter of boundaries and margins is not infrequently recognizable in the socio-political lives of the mystics themselves in that they not infrequently – whether by choice or not – live on the margins of society. Whereas such language of the testing of, breaching of, or disappearance of boundaries figures prominently in mystical texts, in other kinds of religious texts boundary lines are often clearly drawn.

Another technique mystical authors use to get at the paradoxical nature of mystical, immediate consciousness of God is holding and even heightening the tensive relation between opposites: extraordinary/ordinary, inner/outer, presence/absence, light/darkness, silence/speech, stillness/movement, transcendence/immanence, love/knowledge, oneness/otherness, cataphatic/apophatic, individual/social, universal/particular. This stands in contrast to other types of religious writers, who tend to ignore or relieve the tension, either by separating out the opposition or collapsing one side into the other. A mystical author's juxtaposition of opposites, even more than pointing toward the transcendent or extraordinary, performatively presents it by demanding a concentration, virtually impossible to sustain, on two foci at once.

Mystical texts claim a special kind of religious authority

By their very nature, mystical texts claim some kind of special divine authority born of some immediate relationship with God, whether an intensified or heightened experience of God's presence or a reception of some divine disclosure outside of the usual ecclesial forms and mediations. Sometimes this claim to authority is in line with a recognized line of ecclesial authority and shores that up (complementary authority). Clear examples of this would be Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) and Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153).[48] Sometimes this claim to authority stems from alternate sources. These alternate sources have on occasion been recognized and validated by ecclesial authorities (supplemental authority); on other occasions, they have been rejected by, or have themselves challenged, institutional authorities (contraposed authority). While examples here are more open to interpretation, let me suggest, for the former, Abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who had a formal, institutional authority but not necessarily the authority to preach or to teach doctrine, and so declared "Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures" (59). And for the latter, Marguerite Porete, who as an itinerant beguine had no institutional authority and obviously posed a threat to ecclesial and royal authorities; she refused to speak even to defend herself during her imprisonment and trial, apparently remaining true to stated principles in *The Mirror*; she was declared a heretic and was burned at the stake in June, 1310.

Authority – whether moral, spiritual, or political – is never one-dimensional but always involves a dynamic exchange of power. On the one side, it is claimed, assumed, or refused (by those who have or want to have it); on the other side, it is recognized, given, resented or revoked (by those whose state and condition will be influenced by those with authority). It is a very human story, and how it gets played out in particular in Christian mysticism is a fascinating, sometimes tragic, and often dangerous story. There is a lot at stake. For a mystic who claims a special intimacy with God, claims to have received special revelations from God, and claims some kind of access to the divine mysteries – this person is also claiming a normative kind of authority, one that has oftentimes competed with the *de facto* authority of institutions.

Mystical Theology: Talking about God

While some scholars resist the theological content of Christian mystical texts, and some question whether there is any noetic content to mystical experiences, the simple fact remains that these are theological texts insofar as they speak – indeed, make very bold claims – about God, God's nature and existence, about what we may know of God and about how we may know it. One consequence of the scholarship on Christian mystics and mystical texts has been an expansion of the theological canon: "Vernacular Theology," much of which has been authored by so-called mystics, has attracted interest and gained academic credibility.[49] Thus, even if a reader might not be particularly interested in theology or in privileging theological aspects of a text, it may still be helpful to notice

how a mystical author handles the Christian theological tradition, both methodologically and doctrinally.

As Philip Sheldrake (35), Stephen Fields (33), and Mary Frohlich (34) all point out in their chapters, any separation of mystical thought and theology was a late development in western Christianity that has since been challenged and that must be understood as historically conditioned. *Mysticism*, as we have seen, is a modern term that originally had derogatory connotations. A term that predated it was actually *mystical theology*, coined in Greek in the sixth century by the Pseudo-Dionysius as the title of a hugely influential theological treatise. In his *The Mystical Theology*, Dionysius succinctly reviewed two basic forms of speech about God, the *cataphatic* (affirmative) and *apophatic* (negative).[50] It is not, however, that there are two separate ways of talking about God – a way of negation and a way of affirmation – or that one cancels the other out. Because God is both transcendent and immanent, both ways are needed at once. It is the dialectical interplay between these two approaches that provides the impetus (upward) toward "higher" knowledge of God and ultimately toward union with God. For Dionysius, that final stage requires that we even give up this process itself – every affirmation and every denial – so that we entirely abandon ourselves to God and "we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect" (139).

For Christian mystics, the divine immanence and transcendence are not formal ideas that function as rules for writing theology. God's immanence and transcendence are instead experienced in personal, intimate, heightened, and intense ways – which is partly what it means to move from a mere external or rote knowledge of God. The mystic makes the unqualified affirmation of the goodness, love, and presence of God. The mystic often also utters the prophetic "no" to reified, institutionalized, professionalized forms of speech and text about God – reminding readers (or listeners) of the utter transcendence of God and disclosing their investedness and sinfulness. The mystic, therefore, practices and embodies, so to speak, the apophasis (for instance, Eckhart's practice of detachment[51]); likewise, the mystic practices and embodies the cataphasis (for instance, Howard Thurman's [1899–1981] "equilibrium and tranquility of peace"[52] in the face of brutality). The mystic's own experience of God, the language she or he employs to describe it, and in turn the language used to invite the audience into a similar kind of experience or knowledge become powerful tools for describing the divine transcendence and immanence. Even in more formal mystical texts the experiential basis can be palpable.

Interestingly, just as formal theology began to distance itself from mystical theology (with scholasticism in the thirteenth century and then increasing so in the early modern era and the Enlightenment), a new kind of mystical text began to emerge: texts that were more explicitly autobiographical in nature. With this development, descriptions of God's absence and presence became much more particularized, and thus more intensified. Often, especially in texts written in the vernacular, such mystical texts employed what Renevey refers to as the "I-voice."[53] Before this, the "I" was the rare autobiographical "I" of Augustine or the "I" of the Psalms; now it became something else – a participatory "I," the mystic who encounters God powerfully, personally, and particularly (see McNamer 67–73). Here we see clearly how misguided we would be to dismiss mystical texts as oddities, as the product of eccentrics, in as much as this use

of the "I" places them at the center of a much larger socio-philosophical-literary phenomenon, beginning in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but then exploding in the thirteenth – namely, the emergence of the "individual" in the western imagination.

Part of the art of interpreting mystical texts, therefore, is to recognize apophatic and cataphatic language, identifying which is the main tenor and, as importantly, seeing how that is textured and teased by the other. Even the most cataphatic of mystical texts include apophatic notes; the converse is also true. And just how mystical authors employ these two modes of speech, and establish the dynamics between them, is often very particular and therefore revealing of their literary and theological creativity. In short, here we have an example of a recurring theme and technique (a dialectical relation between apophatic and cataphatic language to describe, address, and approach God) that at the same time is always particularized (according to historical context and personal temperament and genius).

In addition to their method of describing God, mystical authors also present and develop Christian doctrines in sometimes novel and compelling ways meant to engage the reader. Even those mystics not formally trained as theologians show themselves to be sophisticated theologians in their knowledge of, and in how they themselves expound, doctrine. Their theology is experientially based as they make important Christological, Trinitarian, and anthropological claims. Significantly, this can offer glimpses into how religious ideas and doctrines actually function in a religious person's life, as well as how the particularities of people's lives can in turn shape doctrine.

Mystical Exegesis: Interpreting the Word of God

In Christian mysticism, the discipline and exploration for which the mystics are known is intimately tied with the interpretation of Scripture and the belief that the mysteries of God are both revealed and hidden there; that Christ, the Word, can be encountered there; and that the Holy Spirit guides the believer and illuminates the mind in the act of interpretation. There are obstacles, however, to discovering and encountering God in Scripture: the stubbornness of the human heart, the obscurity of some passages, the dangers of interpreting certain passages (and names and qualities attributed to God) literally, and the matter of *who* has the authority and opportunity to study Scripture. Origen, as we have seen, was hugely influential in developing a method of interpreting Scripture that presupposed levels of meaning in scripture that paralleled levels of human (as well as metaphysical) existence.[54] He then encouraged Christians to move beyond the literal meaning to the moral (essential for the Christian life and community) and the spiritual/mystical meanings. In short, everything in scripture pertains to the individual soul and, according to Origen, thus can and should be personalized and internalized.

Scriptural exegesis and meditation on Scripture remained a central focus in the history of Christian mysticism. Certain books of scripture (e.g., the Song of Songs), passages and events (e.g., Moses on Sinai, the transfiguration, the Passion), and personalities (e.g., Mary and Martha) proved to be particularly rich resources for Christian mystics. It should be pointed out, however, that the interpretation of these texts, or the

matter of which books, passages, or types are emphasized, did not remain stagnant throughout the history of Christian mysticism. They shifted, taking on or shedding certain meanings depending on the particular contexts – intellectual, cultural, and religious.

A Christian did not have to be a trained exegete to experience the spiritual/mystical dimensions of Scripture; those depths could also be opened by means of preaching. As Patout Burns argues, Augustine was convinced that even the simplest, uneducated Christian could perhaps enjoy a taste or gain a sense for what Scripture promises in the afterlife, so in his sermons he tried to convey that to his congregation.[55] They can also be opened and incorporated through the repetition of singing the Psalms, as Stewart shows.[56] Relatively few Christians in antiquity and the Middle Ages, of course, could engage in actual exegesis. The literacy rate, even though it rose significantly in the thirteenth century, was low; the number of people with the philological and theological skills to do exegesis was, of course, even lower; copies of the Bible and the Psalter were rare and expensive; and there were canonical restrictions on who could interpret Scripture and who could preach. This is where meditations based on scripture, and what Bernard of Clairvaux referred to as "the book of experience," became so important. While not everyone could do exegesis in a strict and narrow sense, many could interpret and apply scripture in a personal and interior way. Beginning with the shift in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to an increased emphasis on the humanity (and especially on the crucified body) of Christ, many Christians began to "read" Christ's body, the incarnate Word, as itself scripture and the wounds as words etched into the parchment. Such meditation on the Word of God was integral to the swift growth of affective spirituality and passion piety in the Middle Ages. The excesses of some of these meditative, affective practices came to be scorned and were replaced by other forms of piety, but they opened up new possibilities nonetheless.

In the Middle Ages, reading, interpreting, and preaching about the meaning of Scripture could be a dangerous act for people who were not ordained (especially for women). So mystical texts, such as Julian of Norwich's *Showings* or Hadewijch's *Visions* and *Letters* are peppered with biblical allusions, even though the modern eye might not always be able to catch them. In the "pre-reformation" in England, Lollards copied the Bible into the vernacular (English) – sometimes in painstakingly tiny script so that these illicit Bibles could be hidden within folds of garments to evade detection.[57] Then, following Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, copies of the Bible became more available, especially as a result of Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament into the vernacular (German). The Protestant Reformers' insistence on *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) was a resounding rejection of those more affective, meditative ways of interpreting the Word in the late Middle Ages, even as it posed new possibilities for unmediated access to God, and with new possibilities came new problems.[58] In more radical strains of the Protestant Reformation, reformers such as Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541) so tied together Scripture and inspiration by the Spirit that they claimed Scripture itself was no longer needed. These fundamental shifts with modernity and the protestant Reformation – so that more individuals and the untrained were both able and encouraged to read Scripture in the vernacular – contributed to profound changes in Christian mysticism and its venues.[59]

Interpreting Scripture and reading the Bible in smaller groups was at the heart of Pietism.[60]

Interpretation of the Word of God in Christianity was not restricted to Scripture. It pertained also to the book of nature. Because God is believed to be the author of creation, and the universe created in and through the Logos, some strains of Christianity viewed nature as a series of signs of God to be read (while other strains insisted that sin has so corrupted us that such knowledge is no longer possible). We find this in Bonaventure's (1221–1274) appropriation of St. Francis' (1181/2–1226) love of nature by transforming it into the doctrine of exemplarism in *The Journey of the Mind to God*,[61] but we also find fertile ground for it in very different (because very modern) theological and scientific worlds. That God cannot be known apart from recognizing the interconnectedness of the universe was central to Schleiermacher's Romantic – and arguably mystical – worldview laid out in his *Speeches* and carried over into his dogmatic theology. It was also of crucial importance in America, where Romanticism, imported from Europe, was shaped into Transcendentalism.[62] Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay "Nature" (1836), "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?" And, since the mid-twentieth century, when Christian theologians began incorporating evolutionary theory into their thought, and especially more recently with the ecological crisis, many religious authors are rethinking the very concept of "nature," stressing the need for human beings to become aware of our oneness with "nature."[63]

Mystical Prayer

Christian mysticism is deeply rooted in, and cannot be dissociated from, Christian practices of prayer, as most of the chapters in this volume illustrate.[64] Indeed, many of the classic mystical texts in Christianity are texts on prayer – one might even call them prayer manuals in that they give advice on how to pray and warn of obstacles to prayer. This is relevant to the debate on whether every Christian, or just a rare few, is called to a mystical relationship with God. Some important questions then, in reading mystical texts or in considering whether a text can be classified as "mystical," are the following: What role does prayer play? What types of prayer are employed or recommended? Is there a stark difference or a continuum between the mystic's way of praying and recognized forms of prayer that are accessible to other people of faith? What are the dominant images, whether spatial and directional, agential (active or passive), or verbal/non-verbal?

There are many types of Christian prayer, among them petitionary, liturgical, dialogical, meditative, and contemplative. It is in liturgical and common prayer that Christian communities offer praise and thanksgiving to God; it is in prayer that the Christian (mystic) addresses God personally as *Thou* (rather than as an object) and is addressed by God; and it is in silent prayer where the Christian (mystic) loves God and is most conscious of God's love. Teresa of Avila distinguished between what she called *oral prayer* and *mental prayer*, where the soul enters into a personal dialogue with God. As

she puts it, you must know to whom you are speaking: "A prayer in which a person is not aware of whom he is speaking to, what he is asking, who it is who is asking and of whom, I do not call prayer however much the lips may move" (38).

Mystical experience or consciousness has historically been associated with contemplative prayer, although two qualifications need to be made. First, contemplative prayer or mystical contemplation does not mean one and the same thing for every mystic, and so (as with just about every aspect of Christian mysticism) we have to attend carefully to how each mystical author who writes about contemplation actually describes it. For instance, Richard of St. Victor describes four levels of contemplation.[65] Usually it refers to an attempt to withdraw from the senses and move beyond more discursive forms of prayer; it can also refer to that entire process, whereby earlier stages are subsumed into later ones, or it can refer to the end of the process.

Second, the very idea of "contemplative prayer" has carried certain associations that have fed certain polemical attitudes in the history of Christianity. The Protestant Reformers eschewed the very notion of contemplative prayer, at least one tied to a goal of union with God, because they and their successors took it to be a form of works-righteousness. But Protestant forms of mysticism that would later emerge were very closely related to prayer – as Ruth Albrecht, for instance, makes clear with regard to Pietism and an "inner" prayer that is closely associated with affective, Christ-centered piety: "We kiss through inward prayer our beloved Redeemer."[66]

If Christian mysticism was rooted in liturgical prayer, it has also acted as a force of protest against the formalism of such prayer. This is especially true since the rise of modernity, and especially in what Schmidt calls the "Romantic construct of mysticism."[67] Mystical prayer can thus be an exercise of freedom and individuality. Indeed, revolutions are often sparked by the great virtuosos of prayer – the mystics.

Introduction to This Volume

This volume is divided into five main parts. Part I, "Themes in Christian Mysticism," highlights five themes that have been defining for Christian mysticism in the sense they have been repeatedly taken up by Christian mystics throughout the centuries, are inseparable from Christian mysticism, or have recurred as vexing issues in the history of Christian mysticism: "The Song of Songs," "Gender," "Platonism," "Aesthetics," and "Heresy." This list is by no means exhaustive, but together these five chapters, each of which can provide a fascinating point of access to Christian mysticism, do important work: they illustrate certain continuities throughout time and across geographical locations, even as they mark shifts and dissemblances; and they illustrate the overlapping nature of central themes.

Parts II, III, and IV are historical in nature, each focusing on a general era. The focus for the most part is on sub-traditions, determined by lines of influence, language, temporal and geographical locations, and genre. Part II, "Early Christian Mysticism," begins with the New Testament and its Judaean–Jewish context, and it carries the story to the ninth century, attending to the eastern Greek and Syrian traditions and the emerging western Latin traditions, noting the lines of influences between and among

them. Part II, "Medieval Mystics and Mystical Traditions," begins with Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century and closes in the fifteenth century with the matter of the "ends" of medieval mysticism. Next, Part IV, "Mysticism and Modernity," begins with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and brings the conversation to the turn of our own century.

Finally, Part V, "Critical Perspectives on Mysticism," considers Christian mysticism from various disciplinary perspectives: theology, philosophy, literary criticism, social sciences, and neuroscience. The volume closes with a chapter on Christian mysticism and interreligious dialogue.

Notes

1   For discussion of the etymology of *mystery* and *mystical*, see Chapters 8 (Soltes), 18 (Demacopoulos), 32 (Gavrilyuk), 35 (Sheldrake), and 40 (Lefebure).
2   See Chapter 7 (Mitchell).
3   Many chapters address the issue of the definition of *mysticism*; for extended discussions see Chapters 10 (Bucur), 30 (Schmidt), 33 (Fields), 34 (Frohlich), 35 (Sheldrake), 36 (Wetzel), 38 (Hood and Chen), and 40 (Lefebure).
4   For discussions of de Certeau's work, see Chapters 9 (Bucur), 26 (Casarella), 30 (Schmidt), and 35 (Sheldrake). For discussion of early modern French mystics, see Chapter 29 (Wright).
5   See Schmidt's extended discussion of the Anglo-American context in Chapter 30.
6   For discussion of James and Underhill see Chapters 30 (Schmidt), 33 (Fields), 34 (Frohlich).
7   For a discussion of Max Weber's and Ernst Troeltsch's typologies of mysticism see Chapter 38 (Hood and Chen).
8   See Chapter 40 (Lefebure).
9   On Teresa of Avila, see Chapter 28 (Howells).
10   See, e.g., Chapters 27 (Tamburello), 29 (Wright), and 34 (Frohlich).
11   See Chapter 3.
12   See Chapter 21.
13   See Chapter 18.
14   See, e.g., Chapters 27 (Tamburello) and 28 (Howells).
15   See Chapters 39 and 38, respectively.
16   See Chapter 13 (Kenney).
17   On Origen, see Chapters 10 (Casiday) and 18 (Demacopoulos).
18   On Gregory of Nyssa, see Chapter 11 (Stang).
19   J. Patout Burns, see below Chapter 14. On Augustine and Monica, see Chapter 13 (Kenney).
20   Here again the question of what distinguishes a mystical text arises. The prison diary of the martyr Perpetua (d. 202/203 CE) might be read as one. On martyrdom and early Christian mysticism, see Chapter 9 (Bucur).
21   Renevey, Chapter 37. On textual cultures, see also Chapters 20 (Harrison), 24 (Whitehead), 25 (Maggi), 31 (Albrecht).
22   See Chapters 28 (Howells) and 29 (Wright).

23   See Chapter 32 below. On the Jesus Prayer, see also Chapter 18 (Demacopoulos).

24   See Chapter 6 (Hornbeck).

25   See Hood and Chen on Troeltsch, Chapter 38 below; see also Chapter 35 (Sheldrake).

26   For extended discussions of Rahner, see Chapters 33 (Fields) and 35 (Sheldrake).

27   For discussions of Dionysius the Areopagite, see Chapters 4 (Otten), 11 (Stang), 12 (Colless).

28   On Porete, see Chapters 3 (Newman), 6 (Hornbeck), and 22 (Rolfson).

29   Cited by Radler; see Chapter 23.

30   Cited by Sheldrake; Chapter 35.

31   For further discussion of the problem of the language of interiority and individualism, see Chapters 9 (Bucur) and 35 (Sheldrake).

32   See Chapters 21 (Cusato) and 31 (Albrecht).

33   The Victorines, in particular, developed a very rich imagery of such mystical movements or valences of the soul; see Chapter 17 (Coolman).

34   Part of what would have been striking in her time is that she was describing to her Sisters the interior dimensions of their own selves, in a culture where women's value was measured externally: beauty, wealth, family honor. Thus, her metaphor, while familiar, was also a challenge to social norms.

35   On Bernard of Clairvaux, see Chapters 1 (Astell and Cavadini), 3 (Newman), and 16 (McGuire); on Julian of Norwich, see Chapters 24 (Whitehead) and 37 (Renevey).

36   On Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola, see Chapter 28 (Howells).

37   See Peter Casarrella's discussion of this in Chapter 26.

38   See Charlotte Radler's discussion of *grunt* in Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso, Chapter 23.

39   See Mary Frohlich's discussion of Theilhard, Chapter 34.

40   See Charles Stang's extended discussion of this, Chapter 11.

41   On the spiritual senses, see Chapter 5 (Saliers).

42   On erotic imagery see Chapters 2 (Astell and Cavadini), 3 (Newman), 4 (Saliers), 20 (Harrison), and 25 (Maggi).

43   On heresy and mysticism, see Chapters 6 (Hornbeck) and 23 (Radler).

44   See Chapter 12 (Colless) for several examples of this.

45   As an example, see Coolman's discussion of the Victorines' innovations in Chapter 17.

46   See Chapter 25 (Maggi).

47   I focus here on mystical texts, hence on literary techniques, but mystics can employ several other kinds of techniques. See, e.g., Hughes on "mimetic discipleship" and "performative self-abasement" in the early Franciscan tradition; Saliers on "embodied acoustical ecstasy and praise"; and Maggi on "religious performance" in Italian women mystics.

48   See Chapters 15 (Stewart) and 16 (McGuire), respectively.

49   See Chapter 37 (Renevey).

50   So many chapters below discuss cataphatic and apophatic language that they are too numerous to list here. For in-depth discussions of Dionysius and his influence, see Chapters 4 (Otten), 5 (Saliers), 11 (Stang), 12 (Colless), and 18 (Demacopoulos).

51   See Chapter 23 (Radler).

52   Cited by Mary Frohlich, in Chapter 34.

53   See below, Chapter 37.

54   For discussions of Origen's method, see Chapters 2 (Astell and Cavadini) 10 (Casiday), and 18 (Demacopoulos).

55   See Chapter 14 (Burns).
56   See Chapter 15 (Stewart).
57   On the Lollards, see Chapter 6 (Hornbeck).
58   See Chapter 27 (Tamburello).
59   On these shifts, see Chapter 35 (Sheldrake).
60   See Chapter 31 (Albrecht).
61   See Chapter 19 (Hughes).
62   See Chapter 30 (Schmidt).
63   On evolution and mysticism, see Chapter 39 (Anderson).
64   For extended discussions of prayer and mysticism, see Chapters 5 (Saliers), 15, (Stewart), 32 (Gavrilyuk).
65   See Chapter 17 (Coolman).
66   See Chapter 31 (Albrecht).
67   See Chapter 30 (Schmidt).

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Themes in Christian Mysticism

CHAPTER 2

The Song of Songs

Ann W. Astell and Catherine Rose Cavadini

"After the Gospel of St. John," writes Pascal P. Parente, "no other sacred book has enjoyed the predilection of the mystics as the Canticle of Canticles" (149). The erotic imagery of the biblical Song of Songs, a collection of love-lyrics attributed to the inspired authorship of King Solomon, has given Christian mystics from the time of Origen of Alexandria (d. 254) a language with which to express the affective dynamics of a life lived in union with Christ: the pangs of compunction, the inexpressibly sweet sensations of the Lord's palpable presence, the fleeting moments of ecstatic union with Christ as his bride, the searing desire for God felt by languishing soul, and the soul's awareness of its own virtuous transformation through the experience of Christ's love.

This understanding of the Song of Songs as "an allegorical dramatization of the various mystical states" (Parente 143) – an understanding foreign to modern form-criticism of the Bible (Pope; Fox) – has sometimes been criticized as a Platonizing imposition upon the biblical text (Nygren; Pope 115). The Song's very acceptance into the biblical canon and its frequent quotation in Rabbinic commentary on other books of the Bible (a number of which also employ erotic and marital imagery), however, argue that it has always been interpreted mystically and allegorically, from an inter-biblical perspective, as referring to the love-relationship between God and Israel (Kingsmill; Lyke). Instructed by New Testament descriptions of Christ's relationship to the church as that of a bridegroom to his bride (Matthew 9:15, 25:1–13; John 3:28–29; Ephesians 5:23–25; Revelation 19:7, 9) and in dialogue with Jewish interpreters (Pope 116), Origen interpreted the Song of Songs as referring allegorically to the love between Christ and his bride, the "soul made in His image, or . . . the Church" (21). Origen's ten-volume commentary – four books of which survive in Rufinus's Latin translation (Brésard and Crouzel 12–13) – can be said to have set the stage for all subsequent Christian mystical interpretations of the Song of Songs (Astell, Ohly, Matter, Turner), excerpted passages from which have been conveniently compiled (from the patristic and medieval sources) in Richard A. Norris's 2003 edition of the biblical text.

In this essay, we focus on key representative figures within this vast exegetical tradition – from the age of the Fathers, Origen (third century) (see Chapter 10, this volume); from the Middle Ages, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), William of Saint-Thierry (c. 1075–1148), and Rupert of Deutz (1077–1129) (see Chapter 16, this volume); from the early modern and modern periods, Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591)(see Chapter 28, this volume), and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) (see Chapter 34, this volume). All of these interpreters understand the Song of Songs not only mystically (that is, as veiling a hidden, Christological meaning), but also in reference to their own personal mystical experience, which has been illumined by their Christological reading of the Song of Songs. In doing so, we emphasize that for these mystics, a sustained and deep meditation on Scripture, fostered by the church's liturgy and teaching, opens the door into the experience of Christ's presence. In agreement with Bernard McGinn, we see Rupert of Deutz as marking a turning point within this exegetical tradition, in that his detailed descriptions of personal visionary experiences, albeit presented in the context of biblical exposition and typology, render those experiences individual to a degree that anticipates later, Song-inspired mystical autobiographies (McGinn 329).

Origen: The Song of Songs as Mystical Drama

Interpreting Canticles 2:8, Origen of Alexandria offers a picture of the soul set at the task of reading this Song: she "contemplates and seeks God with a pure and spiritual love" (44) and receives "frequent and abundant perceptions like ever-flowing streams" (216). These, and many other passages penned by Origen as he commented on the Song, contain the seeds of the mystic's language and the mystical experience as it was developed by the Christian tradition in both the east and the west. However, with Origen the "mystical" remains a robustly theological concept; the "mystical" is that by which the soul participates in the "realization" of the church by living the mysteries of Christ, into which the soul is drawn at Baptism (Stolz 219).

As Origen explains in the Prologue to his commentary, the Canticle is titled the Song of Songs precisely because it is the most sublime song sung by the soul in her mystical ascent. The soul's progression through Scripture's other six songs (Exodus 15:1–21; Numbers 21: 17–18; Deuteronomy 32:1–43; Judges 5:1–31; 2 Samuel 22:1–51; Isaiah 5:1–7) prepares the soul for the Song of Songs. This preparation takes place within the church, where the soul can be progressively instructed by the Logos. Describing the first step in the soul's spiritual ascent, the singing of the *Cantemus Domino* from Egypt (Exodus 15:1), Origen presents the Israelites' journey across the Red Sea as symbolic of Baptism and thus of one's entrance into the mystical life. The seed of mystical life, planted at Baptism, develops as the soul advances toward the nuptial feast described by the Song of Songs (Rousseau 33). Consequently, the *Cantemus Domino* expresses the soul's joy in being welcomed not only into the church from the waters of baptism, but into the church's mystical life.

The Song is the seventh step on Origen's mystical ascent. When the soul arrives at this summit, possessing a pure heart and a purely spiritual love for the Bridegroom, she

no longer need fear the literal sense of the Song, but confidently reads it in order to access the Song's "inner meaning," and receive with it a vision of her Bridegroom. Origen comments: "For, when the soul has completed these studies, by means of which it is cleansed in all its actions and habits and is led to discriminate between natural things, it is competent to proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters, and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love" (44).

Fully grasping what the "mystical" is for Origen requires an understanding of his exegetical approach. For Origen, the Canticle's singularly spiritual nature expresses the mystical more readily than any other scriptural text. The first Christian exegete to recognize the Song's literary veil as that of a dramatic play, Origen perceives under this guise both the hidden, mystical love-story of Christ and the church and the spiritual story of God and the soul. In other words, the Song's three levels of sense – the literal, mystical (pneumatic), and spiritual (psychic) – lead the Song's reader through the three mystical stages, the most interior of which, the spiritual, cannot be reached except by the first two.

This perception of Scripture's structure corresponds to Origen's understanding of the human person as tri-partite. While Scripture is made up of the literal (also referred to as the "historical"), the mystical, and spiritual senses, the human person is composed of body, soul, and spirit. The affinity between Scripture and the human being as structural complements of each other testifies, in Origen's view, to the accessibility of the Word and explains how the reading of Scripture occasions mystical experiences of the Bridegroom. In Book One of his commentary, Origen instructs the soul to request an "understanding" of "mystical matters," to request, that is "perceptions" of the Bridegroom through the spiritual sense of Scripture: "Let the soul say in her prayer to God: 'Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.' For . . . when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, . . . then let her believe that she has now received the kisses of the Spouse Himself, that is, the Word of God" (61).

Origen's homilies and commentary on the Canticle proclaim the progress made through the mystical stages by the successive acts of reading Scripture and seeking its innermost meaning. As interpreter, Origen signals the movements to his reader, so that he or she might go with him into the text. Together, they easily move from the literal: "It is advisable for us to remind you frequently that this little book is cast in the form of a play" (205); to the mystical: "This passage can, however, be taken in another sense too . . . the veil is removed for the Bride, that is, for the Church that has turned to God" (214); and finally, "in order to include a third interpretation," they turn to "the subject of the individual soul" (216). Only here, in the third place, are they "embraced" and "instructed" by Christ, receiving "frequent and abundant perceptions like ever-flowing streams" (216).

In *The Letter and the Spirit*, Henri deLubac discusses the significance of Origen preserving the spiritual meaning as the innermost meaning of the Song. When Origen's discussion of the soul comes second, as it usually does with Origen's interpretation of Scripture's other books, it pertains to "the soul in itself . . . of its nature, of its faculties, of its vices and virtues, independent of Christian realities" (deLubac 163–164). However, when Origen reserves the soul for his *tertia expositio*, as he does in the Commentary on the Song of Songs, it becomes "a question of the 'faithful' soul, of the soul

'seeing God,' of the soul 'turned toward God' and 'adhering to the Logos,' of the perfect soul, or at least the soul 'tending toward perfection' . . . In other words, it is a question of 'the soul in the Church,' which is the royal dwelling where the Logos instructs it" (deLubac 164). For Origen, the soul's mystical experience of the Bridegroom only occurs within the church. The "spiritual" understanding of Scripture, then, can be read as the soul's particular experience of the "mystical" – of, that is, the instruction of the Logos as it is poured out frequently and abundantly within the church. Accordingly, Origen's commentary on the Song maintains what deLubac calls the "inner relationships" of the text's senses such that the individual soul as bride is always treated in the third place, after the church as Bride, within whose espousal the soul participates (170).

Three Twelfth-Century Exegetes: The Song as the "Book of Our Experience"

Origen's writings on the Song of Songs, alongside those of Saint Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) (see Chapter 15, this volume), exerted an enormous influence during the twelfth century (Leclercq 118–119), when a powerful movement of monastic renewal in the west affected the existing Benedictine houses and saw the rise of new religious orders, chief among them, the Cistercians. Complementing the *Rule* of Saint Benedict, the Song of Songs – more than any other sacred book – held a special place among monks as "the book of our own experience" (to echo a famous phrase from Saint Bernard's Sermon 3 on the Song) (1:16).

The use of the plural pronoun "our" is significant. Although Bernard of Clairvaux is rightly credited with psychological acuity in his affective appropriation of the lyrical voices of the Song, he follows Origen in understanding every soul's brideship and personal mystical experience to be participatory in that of the church. At the praying heart of the church on earth and anticipating the ceaseless worship of the church in Heaven, the men and women who entered twelfth-century monasteries as "schools of charity" (*scholae charitatis*) took up a regulated way of life, lived in community, that was explicitly oriented toward contemplation (*contemplatio* being the term commonly used to name the mystical experience of God's presence) through psalmody and manual work, the reading and memorization of Scripture, meditation, and prayer (all of these traditional components of *lectio divina*). In his eighty-six eloquent sermons on the Song of Songs – originally preached in chapter at Clairvaux and then revised for publication and dissemination to other houses – St. Bernard helped his fellow monks to see the conversion of manners to which they had committed themselves as a process of growth into a shared and enduring life of brideship, of intimate union with God, to be perfected in heaven.

In St. Bernard's writings, as in Origen's, scriptural meditation is so closely tied to mystical experience that it is practically impossible to separate one from the other. When the soul has been purified through the purgation of vices and the rectifying practice of virtues, "there follows," writes Bernard in Sermon 57 on the Song of Songs, "an immediate and unaccustomed expansion of the mind, an infusion of light that illuminates the intellect to understand Scripture and comprehend the mysteries"

(3:102). This condition, which Bernard understands to become habitual, constitutes the normal contemplative life, out of which teaching, preaching, and service flow. As God wills, Bernard explains in Sermon 52, the soul who attains to "angelic purity" may briefly experience the "sleep of the bride" that involves an "ecstasy" akin to "death," during which the contemplation of God is imageless (3:52–53). After such an experience of the soul's union with the God who "is Spirit" (John 4:24), however, the memory immediately clothes it in images, Bernard notes (in Sermon 41), "either as an aid to understanding or to temper the intensity of the divine light" (2:206–207). The soul's mystic experience is thus retold as in scriptural language, even as meditation upon Scripture has prepared it for such an experience.

When St. Bernard comments on the Bride's words, "Return, my beloved" (Sg. 2:17), in his seventy-fourth sermon on the Song, he echoes Origen's own words in one of his two surviving homilies on the Canticle, known to him in the translation of Saint Jerome (Gilson 216). This echo is striking, because it occurs in the famous passage where the abbot of Clairvaux, in a Pauline speech of "foolishness" (2 Corinthians 11:1), confesses that "the Word has also come to me . . . and has come many times" (4:89). The form and frequency of these divine visitations, as Bernard describes them, offers a description of the contemplative life and of mystical experience that is marked not by paranormal phenomena, but rather by its perceived normality for a devout Christian: "Only by the movement of my heart . . . did I perceive his presence; and I knew the power of his might because my faults were put to flight . . . In the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind, that is, of my inmost being, I have perceived the excellence of his glorious beauty" (4:91). For St. Bernard, as for Origen, mystical union marks the perfected life of a Christian soul.

In some respects, Origen's influence is even more obvious in William of Saint-Thierry's *Exposition on the Song of Songs* (1139) than it is in the sermons on the Song by William's close friend, St. Bernard. A late work, composed at Signy after his entrance into the Cistercian order, it has been called "the work par excellence of William's life," the "secret of a soul," told in the form of a soliloquy on the Song (Déchanet xi). In the Preface to his exposition, William follows Origen in describing the Song as a drama, but he goes on to indicate (again in accord with Origen) that the Song is a kind of mirror that reflects back to the reader his or her own spiritual age and state at prayer. Like Origen, William identifies three such states, which correspond to the different levels at which Scripture's meaning can be grasped: animal (that of beginners), rational (that of those making progress in the striving for virtue), and spiritual (that of the perfect). "For as the man of prayer himself is," writes William, "so the God to whom he prays appears to him" (11).

Like Origen, who understands the Song to be the love-story and the prayer of the bridal soul, William and Bernard teach that the Song begins abruptly, *in medias res,* after the soul who speaks has already advanced toward perfection. She longs for and confidently requests "the kiss of the mouth" (Sg. 1:1) because she has already experienced the giving and receiving not only of other kinds of kisses (of the feet, in penance and compunction; of the hand, in virtuous service), but also perhaps even of the mouth itself in moments of spiritual intimacy (Bernard, Sermons 3–8, 1:16–52). Having previously encountered the Bridegroom in the Song's garden (historical sense) and the

king's storerooms of illumined virtue (moral sense) and doctrine (allegorical sense), perhaps even (among these storerooms) in the "cellar of wine" (Sg. 2:4) of ecstasy, the soul longs for the kiss of the bedchamber. Bernard, who uses the imagery of the three rooms in Sermon 23 to mark the soul's progress toward perfection, explains that the soul periodically suffers the withdrawal of the Bridegroom's felt presence so that her desire for him might increase, and that she might be drawn, desirous, into the bedchamber of the mystical marriage, "the mystery of divine contemplation" (2:33) that antici- pates the heavenly vision. William, in the Prologue to his exposition, concurs: "The Bridegroom went forth and withdrew; and thereupon she was wounded by charity, enkindled with desire of him who was absent" (23). Appropriating the words of the bride, the reader of the Song prays longingly for the renewal of intimacy in the form of the kiss.

Building upon the traditional allegorical interpretation of the historical kiss as refer- ring to the incarnation (a theme wonderfully elaborated by Bernard in his second Sermon) and inspired by liturgical use of the Song of Songs on Marian feasts, the Ben- edictine abbot Rupert of Deutz became (c. 1125) the first Christian exegete to identify the bride systematically throughout the Song of Songs with the Virgin Mary (Ohly 125–135, McGinn 328–333) – an exegetical innovation through which Mary, as an archetype of the church, functions also as a type or *figura* for the individual Christian soul as bride. A staunch supporter of the Gregorian reforms at a time when the church suffered grave division, Rupert's Marian commentary on the Song reflects his ecclesiol- ogy and inspires love for the church as Christ's Bride. Emphasizing Mary's role as Mother of the Incarnate Word and prophetess, Rupert clearly identifies himself with her as a preacher, called to defend the faith against heresy and to promote the unity of the church in Christ.

A visionary, Rupert describes in detail in the twelfth book of his commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (c. 1127) the nine visions he had received (mainly in the form of dream-visions) in his youth, the first five in 1100 and the last four in 1108, shortly before his long-delayed ordination as a priest. Quotations from the Song of Songs color the narratives of visions 8 and 9. He retells one of these experiences in his Prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs (6) and later in the commentary he includes two stories concerning the visionary experiences of a certain unnamed youth (110–111), which are almost certainly also autobiographical. There, interpreting Song of Songs 5:4 ("My beloved thrust his hand through the opening, and my womb trem- bled at his touch"), Rupert relates the youth's memory of a nocturnal vision, during which Christ's hand reached into his chest and held his heart, beating with ineffable joy (110).

Three Carmelite Mystics: Autobiographical Commentary on Canticles

Erotic, sensory, and individual in a way that Bernard's and William's affective and personal accounts of "our experience" are not, Rupert's blending of biblical exegesis and autobiography remains fundamentally monastic, typological, and ecclesial, even as it anticipates the so-called *Brautmystik* of later medieval and modern mystics, who

tell their own stories as those of Christ's bride, borrowing images from the Song of Songs, paraphrasing it, or quoting it directly. Among these, the Carmelite saints Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux hear the Song of Songs as giving voice to the soul and clothing its mystical experience with the most fitting expression.

Commenting on the Song sometime between 1571 and 1573, Teresa of Avila wrote her *Conceptions of the Love of God . . . upon certain words of the "Songs" of Solomon* for the "edification of her spiritual daughters" (352–353) as they "practice prayer" (363). Teresa says she hopes "to explain to [them] how to appreciate some of the texts in the *Canticles* when [they] hear them," and to continue "pondering on the great mysteries hidden in this language used by the Holy Spirit" so as to "enkindle [their] love for Him" (360). With this aim, her treatment of the contemplative life in this commentary confirms the mystical doctrine found in her *Autobiography* (1565), the *Way of Perfection* (1566), and the *Interior Castle* (1577).

Teresa describes the Song's voicing of the mystical experience as a double utterance, composed of "words which pierce the soul that loves Thee, and which in these Canticles Thou dost utter and teach it to utter too" (382). The Song both describes the love of God to the soul and becomes the soul's loving response to God. However, Teresa also invites "her daughters" to enter more deeply into their prayer, because there are experiences of the Bridegroom that cannot be accurately "clothed" in language, not even by the Song: "There are clearly no words with which He can express [His love for us] as clearly as He has already expressed it by His actions . . . Once we realize that His love was so strong and powerful that it made Him suffer so, how can we be amazed by any words which He may use to express it?" (361) The soul, therefore, contemplates the Song's poetic images and lyrics of love not only as the best possible linguistic expression of God's love, but also in order to enter more deeply into an understanding of God's love as expressed in the mysteries of Christ's life, death, and resurrection (362). In the Song, the mystic receives an expression of her experience of the mystery of the divine Love revealed in Jesus.

Accordingly, Teresa's own "interior" knowledge of the Canticle arose from her participation in the church's liturgical celebration of Christ's Mystery. In particular, in what Parente calls an important new development within the tradition of mystical interpretation of the Song (Parente 151), Teresa interprets the "kiss" of the Song's opening line: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" (Sg. 1:1) as referring to the Eucharist. Astonished that Sacred Scripture allows "a worm" to address "its Creator" with a request for a kiss, Teresa in the *Conceptions* answers her own objection: "Dear God! Why should we be astounded at this? Does not the reality give us greater cause for wonder? Do we not approach the Most Holy Sacrament?" (363). Appropriating the words of Canticles 1:1 to express the soul's desire for the Eucharist, Teresa shows that the biblical word and the sacrament mutually illumine each other. The union that occurs between the soul and God through the Eucharist allows the soul to turn to the words of the Song and more deeply to contemplate the love expressed both there in the Song and in the mystery of Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection, renewed in the sacrament of the altar.

The mystical experience, as described by Teresa, arises from the contemplative or interior prayer nurtured by liturgical experiences and rooted in the love that binds

Christ and the church. In this way, the soul enters ever more intimately into this union of love, experiencing first the "Prayer of Quiet" and then the "Prayer of Union." Teresa describes the progress of the soul as the "sweetness" of God's love, already tasted in the church's liturgy, being "poured" into her "whole being" (384). Teresa expresses this mystical experience with the help of Canticles 1:1–2 (in the Vulgate): "thy breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments." Drawn closely to the Bridegroom, the soul "is like one who swoons from excess of pleasure and joy and seems to be suspended in those Divine arms and drawn near to that sacred side and to those Divine breasts" (384). Here, the soul experiences the "Prayer of Quiet." She is aware of God's nearness, as His love "pervades" her "whole being" (384). The "Prayer of Union" is the excessive and ecstatic "pleasure" of being drawn so close to God, to be as if held to His own side.

Connecting this drawing to the Song's first verse, Teresa describes the mystical experiences of spiritual espousal and spiritual union as a reception of the longed-for "kisses of His mouth" (386). These "kisses" arise from "kisses" such as the Eucharist. Further illustrating this, Teresa boldly begs God "by the blood of [His] Son" to remain "near" her, not only in the Most Holy Sacrament, but also by granting her the "kiss of His mouth" that constitutes their spiritual union (386). This spiritual marriage, writes Teresa, is the "greatest blessing that can be enjoyed in life" (385).

Teresa instructs the souls seeking this ecstatic, unitive state of prayer, however, to remain also actively attentive to their neighbor. In fact, a true understanding or experience of God's love naturally leads to the active life, for the wills of God and the soul become one in the "Prayer of Union" (377). The active life, therefore, witnesses to the soul's intimacy with the Bridegroom. As a result of this intimacy, the soul understands His sufferings as "for us," and so desires and wills to suffer for Him. Teresa reads Canticles 2:5, "Stay me up with flowers, compass me about with apples, for I languish with love," as an exhortation to the active life of service to one's neighbor as it arises from the contemplative life: "When active works proceed from this source, they are like wondrous and sweetly scented flowers" (396–397). Thus, the flowers of the Canticle are the good works done for one's neighbor, such that they witness both to God's love for us, His "neighbors," and the soul's love for God.

As Teresa explains, the "flowers" of good works lead to the "apples" (Sg. 2:5) of suffering, through which the soul shares in the Passion of Christ: "It is these flowers that produce fruit; these are the apple-trees of which the Bride speaks when she says: 'Compass me about with apples.' 'Give me trials, Lord,' she cries . . . she delights in imitating, in some degree, the most toilsome life led by Christ" (398). With this, the apple imagery of Canticles 2:5 expresses the outward, or exterior, manifestation in suffering of the spiritual union with God accomplished through prayer. Having learned of God's love and having been united to the Bridegroom in this very love, the contemplative responds to the Paschal Mystery of Christ by desiring a share in Christ's own Passion, the love between them now being "as strong as death" (Sg. 8:6).

Teresa's interpretation of the bride's request to be encompassed with apples surely draws upon earlier tradition, but it also reflects the Passion-centered spirituality of her close collaborator in the Carmelite reform, St. John of the Cross. *The Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross – the first thirty-six stanzas of which he composed while a

prisoner in Toledo (1577–1578) (John of the Cross, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 399–400) – is not so much a commentary on the Song of Songs as "an imitation and almost a paraphrase of the Canticle" (Pope 188). As St. John indicates in the Prologue, it is a love poem "composed with a certain burning love of God" and recounting his own experience of "interior converse with God" (408–409). By voicing his own mystical experiences, John presents a description of the "spiritual marriage" to which every soul aspires. For John, this "spiritual marriage" is described most simply by St. Paul: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me [Galatians 2:20]" (498).

In the *Spiritual Canticle,* John's "interior converse . . . overflows in figures and similes" (408), which he himself interprets in the commentary that accompanies the individual stanzas of the poem. In his Prologue John states that he makes "use of [his] experiences," but also "explain[s] and confirm[s] at least the more difficult matters through passages from Sacred Scripture" (410). Thus, via his own commentary on his *Spiritual Canticle*, we learn how the Song of Songs inspired his expression of the mystical experiences leading up to the "spiritual marriage."

According to John, the soul advances toward the "spiritual marriage" by advancing in "mystical theology," "which is known through love and by which one not only knows but at the same time experiences" (409). Mystical theology, therefore, teaches "a sweet and living knowledge . . . that secret knowledge of God which spiritual persons call contemplation," and which God imparts "in the love with which He communicates Himself to the soul" (518).

Perhaps inspired by Origen's image of the "dart" of Christ (Origen 199; Crouzel 123), John describes the three kinds of knowledge of the Beloved that the soul receives as three "wounds": the simple "wound," the "sore wound," and the "festering wound" (438). As the soul suffers increasingly profound "wounds," she grows in knowledge and love of God – in what John calls "mystical theology." In these three "wounds," then, John marks the stages through which the soul advances in both knowledge and love, in order to achieve the mystical experience of "spiritual marriage." One advances through the "traces" of God in creation, then by the knowledge of faith, and finally via the "unknowing" (symbolized by the *nescivi* of Sg. 6:12) wherein one is intimately bound to the Bridegroom.

The first "wound," or the first stage of knowing and loving God, is received by the soul from creation (438). As creation reflects the beauty of the Creator, it allows the soul to seek and to begin to know something of the Creator. John sees this first wound described in Canticles 5:8 as the soul "languishes" with love. Yet, it is Canticles 4:6 that describes the end to which this first stage eventually leads. Having perceived the beauty of God in creation, the soul urges the Bridegroom: "let us go forth to the mountain to behold ourselves in Your beauty," meaning (as John interprets this stanza), "Transform me into the beauty of divine Wisdom and make me resemble it, which is the Word, the Son of God" (548). The soul cannot be transformed into this beauty unless she is transformed in Wisdom, which she receives on the "hill of incense" and the "mountain of myrrh" (Sg. 4:6).

The second, "sore wound," is the wound of faith. This wound is "produced in the soul by knowledge of the Incarnation of the Word and of the mysteries of faith" – a knowledge through belief that produces a "more intense love" in the soul (438).

"Speaking of this to the soul in the Canticle of Canticles, the Bridegroom says: "You have wounded my heart, my sister, with one of your eyes and with one hair of your neck [Cant. 4:9]" (438). John also hears Song of Songs 1:10 sing of this "wound." "Faith, consequently, gives us God," he writes, "but covered with the silver of faith . . . When the bride of the Canticle wanted this possession of God, He promised to make her, insofar as possible in this life, gold earrings, plated with silver [Sg. 1:10]" (454–455). Thus, the soul possesses the God who is "hidden in faith," but she should still advance toward the spiritual marriage by seeking an understanding of faith, uniting "her intellect with God in the knowledge of the mysteries of the Incarnation, in which is contained the highest and most savory wisdom of all His works" (454–455).

This search for understanding John sees imaged in Song of Songs 2:13–14. Commenting on lines from stanza 37, "And then we will go on/To the high caverns in the rock," John writes (in a manner reminiscent of St. Bernard's Sermons 61–62): "The soul, then, earnestly longs to enter these caverns of Christ in order to be absorbed, transformed, and wholly inebriated in the love of the wisdom of these mysteries, and hide herself in the bosom of the Beloved" (551). According to St. John, the mystical experience arising from the knowledge of faith is the "spiritual espousal." Here the Bridegroom espouses the soul to Himself, as her love continues to grow. Once the soul has "entered" these "clefts" or the "bosom of the Beloved," she will be "absorbed" and "transformed" by the experience of "spiritual marriage" (551).

The third wound "is like dying" because the soul "lives by dying until love, in killing her, makes her live the life of love, transforming her in love" (438). John goes on to name what causes this "death of love in the soul" as "a touch of supreme knowledge of the divinity, the 'I-don't-know-what'" (438–439). Here, we move from "spiritual espousal" to "spiritual marriage," wherein the "soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation" (439). As John comments, the words of his own *Canticle*, "I drank of my beloved," bespeak the soul's desire for this "spiritual marriage": "the intellect drinks wisdom, when desiring to attain this kiss of union and seeking it from the bridegroom" (439). John hears the bride hoping for this union in Song of Songs 8:2, which he paraphrases as follows: "There You will teach me (wisdom and knowledge and love), and I shall give You a drink of spiced wine (my love spiced with Yours, transformed in Yours)" (512). The "unknowing" that is received with the third "wound" transforms the Bride into the love of Christ. As John explains, this transformation is the *nescivi* of Canticles 6:12 [11]: "that elevation and immersion of the mind in God, in which the soul is as though carried away and absorbed in love, entirely transformed in God" (514), suddenly caught up, as it were, "before" she is "aware," to find herself riding in a "chariot beside [her] prince" (Sg. 6:12).

Following Gregory the Great, who cites the Song of Songs in his *Moralia in Job* (see Leclercq 108), John presents the wise man Job as an example of the Bride. As one who has learned of God's beauty by suffering these three wounds, Job represents the soul "enkindled with love of God" and "yearn[ing] for the fulfillment and perfection of love" (445). The Bride, therefore, is the "Wise Man" whose love has been constantly fed by knowledge and his knowledge by love as the soul grows closer to Christ until, in the next life, she is really transformed "into the beauty of both His created and uncreated

wisdom, and also into the beauty of the union of the Word with His humanity, in which she will know Him face to face" (553). The soul undergoing this transformation, even in this life, is transformed such that Christ now "lives" in the soul, and as Bride the soul both knows and loves by experiencing the fullness of God's love. This, for John, is the "mystical theology" of the Song of Songs.

The young Carmelite nun, known throughout the modern world as Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, was an avid reader of the writings of St. John of the Cross and shared his predilection for the Song of Songs. Her *Story of a Soul*, first published posthumously in 1898, contains, as the fruit of her *lectio divina*, nine quotations of the Song itself and eleven from St. John's writings, including five from the *Spiritual Canticle.* Thérèse once said, "If I had the time I would like to comment on the Canticle of Canticles; in this book I have discovered such profound things about the union of the soul with the Beloved" (Murphy 7). While Thérèse never had the opportunity to write this commentary, she often lifted lyrics from the Song while writing letters to her sisters, especially Céline, and she included a beautiful interpretation of Canticles 1:4 (1:3 in the Vulgate numbering), "Draw me – we will run," in her *Story of a Soul* (254), the autobiography she composed in three discrete sections between 1895 and 1897, the year of her death.

Thérèse's extended comments on Canticles 1:4 appear in the final pages of her *Story*, not long after she speaks of her vocation simply as "love." Having long desired to do heroic deeds for Christ like those of missionaries, priests, crusaders, and martyrs, St. Thérèse learns the heroic quality of loving in "little ways." She exclaims: "MY VOCATION IS LOVE! Yes, I have found my place in the Church . . . in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be *Love*" (194). Her interpretation of Canticles 1:4, therefore, is a commentary on this vocation: how she is "drawn" by God's love, and how she, as love, "draws" others to God.

Like St. Teresa, St. Thérèse came to know the Song of Songs through the Divine Office and *lectio divina*. Her reading and interpretation of the Song and its commentaries colored her memory of her life's experience. Hints of Teresa's treatment of the Song's opening lines can be found, for example, in Thérèse's discussion of her First Holy Communion: "Ah! how sweet was that first kiss of Jesus! It was a kiss of *love* . . . For a long time now Jesus and poor little Thérèse [had] *looked at* and understood each other. That day it was no longer simply a *look*; it was a fusion; they were no longer two" (77). The "little" Thérèse, like the great Teresa, understands the church's sacraments as a source of the mystical life.

Accordingly, Thérèse tells us that it was "one morning during [her] thanksgiving" after Holy Communion that, by God's gift, she came to "understand these words" of Canticles 1:4 (254). Thérèse interprets the "Draw me" of this passage as a prayer asking Jesus to unite her soul to Him, for He had won her heart. Proposing an analogy, she asks, "If fire and iron had the use of reason and if the latter said to the other: 'Draw me,' would it not prove that it desires to be identified with the fire in such a way that the fire penetrate it and drink it up with its burning substance and seem to become one with it?" (257). This, Thérèse adds, is precisely her own prayer: that Jesus "draw" her "into the flames of His love" and "unite [her] so closely to Him that He live and act in [her]" (257).

Thérèse saw herself as having been "drawn" by God's love from the days of her childhood. Describing the close bond between her and her sister Céline, which made them also "*spiritual sisters*" from their youth (103), Thérèse quotes the twenty-fifth stanza of St. John's *Spiritual Canticle* (a text that echoes Canticles 1:4): "Following your footprints/Maidens run lightly along the way;/The touch of a spark,/The special wine/Cause flowings in them from the balsam of God." Thérèse thus depicts herself as having run with Céline "very *lightly*" and gaily along the path in the track of "Jesus' footprints," inflamed by the "sparks of love He sowed so generously in [their] souls" (103), until "love," she writes, "made us find on earth the One whom we were seeking" (104). Quoting the Song of Songs 8:1,Thérèse notes that everything, from the beauty of creation to the images and signs that veil God's sacramental presence, "raised our souls to heaven" (103), exerting a drawing power that led them to receive the Bridegroom's "kiss" (104).

Elsewhere, continuing her commentary on Canticles 1:4, Thérèse sets down her understanding of "the sweet odor of the Beloved." She writes: "Since Jesus has reascended into heaven, I can follow Him only in the traces He has left; but how luminous these traces are! How perfumed! I have only to cast a glance in the Gospels and immediately I breathe in the perfumes of Jesus' life, and I know on which side to run" (258). The knowledge of Christ given in the Gospels is also the trace of God's love – the love that "draws" Thérèse as she "runs" in Christ's "footsteps." Having been introduced to the "science of Love," she confessed, "I desire only this science. *Having given all my riches for it,* I esteem it *as having given nothing,* as did the bride in the sacred Canticles [Sg. 8:7]" (187–188).

Thérèse understands that if her vocation is to be love – that is, to be Christ's love – then she must also "draw" souls to God with God's love, so that they "run together" in the "fragrance" of Christ's life (Sg. 1:4): "When a soul allows herself to be captivated by the *odor of your ointments,* she cannot run alone, all the souls whom she loves follow in her train" (254). This occurs, moreover, "without constraint, without effort, it is a natural consequence of her attraction" to God (254). This, as Thérèse sees it, is her vocation.

Thus, Thérèse closes her autobiography with a description of her vocation to be drawn by God's love and to "draw" others within the mystical life of the church. Remembering that "the Church is a Queen, since she is [Christ's] Spouse," and that she is "*the Child of the Church,*" Thérèse resolves to "stay very close to the *throne* of the King and Queen" in order to intercede for her missionary brothers (196). "The little child," she writes, "*will strew flowers,* she will perfume the royal throne with their *sweet scents*, and she will sing in her silvery tones the canticle of *Love*" (196). Fusing together the images of flowers scattered in the Corpus Christi processions she loved from her childhood (41) with those of the roses and lilies of the Song of Songs 2:1 (78), traditionally interpreted to symbolize the works of charity (cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 47, 3:3–10), Thérèse imagines herself throwing her "fragile, worthless petals, these songs of love from the littlest of hearts" (197) up to the church triumphant in Heaven, whose love gathers them and places them into God's hands, before letting them fall back to earth to assist the church below, still suffering in Purgatory and militant on earth: "And this Church in heaven, desirous of playing with her little child, will cast these flowers, which are now infinitely valuable because of your divine touch, upon the Church Suf-

fering in order to extinguish its flames and upon the Church Militant in order to gain the victory for it" (197).

Ecclesial and therefore mystical, biblical and autobiographical, Thérèse's interpretation of the Song of Songs seamlessly weaves its verses into the story of her soul. Its canticle of love is hers, even as patristic and medieval commentators had earlier found in it the "book of our experience," a drama in which they could participate, a song they could sing.

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CHAPTER 3

Gender

Barbara Newman

As a quest for experiential union with God, mysticism seeks to transcend all catego-
ries of human thought, including sex and gender. Paradoxically, however, the
writings we call "mystical" offer a profusion of gendered images. If the Divine is beyond
gender, human beings are not, so it remains difficult to conceive – much less write – of
a loving union between divine and human persons without recourse to gendered lan-
guage. In this essay I will mention a few strategies mystics have used to bypass that
category, then look at the many ways they have represented the soul's relationship with
God as gendered, paying special attention to the feminine Divine. Finally, I will examine
some assumptions that have dogged modern scholarship, fostering a devaluation of
women as less spiritually proficient than men.

Scholars customarily recognize two broad types of mysticism: the apophatic or nega-
tive way, which aims to transcend images derived from creatures, and the affirmative
or cataphatic way, which approaches God through the symbols of Nature and Scrip-
ture. In the Neoplatonic tradition, God is seen pre-eminently as the One, the Good, or
Being Itself. Limiting categories such as gender are minimized, even when masculine
pronouns are used by convention. The fountainhead of apophatic mysticism, Dionysius
the Areopagite (sixth century) (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume), characterized the
Divine in his brief but influential treatise, *The Mystical Theology*, as

> neither soul nor intellect; nor has he imagination, opinion, speech, or understand-
> ing; . . . neither has he power nor is power, nor is he light; neither does he live nor is he
> life; neither is he essence, nor eternity nor time; nor is he subject to intelligible contact;
> nor is he knowledge nor truth, nor kingship, nor wisdom . . . neither is he darkness nor
> light, nor the false nor the true; nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to
> him . . . inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirma-
> tion, and the simple preeminence of his absolute nature is outside of every negation.
> (McGinn 2006: 289)

In this rarefied tradition it is possible to say only *that* God is, not *what* God is – certainly not male or female. Another apophatic mystic, Meister Eckhart (d. 1327) (see Chapter 23, this volume), used a few gendered metaphors, but preferred abstract language about the silent desert or "ground of the soul" where it encounters God in stillness and darkness, free of all images. Ultimately the two become "One Single One": "one with One, one from One, one in One . . . one everlastingly" (McGinn 2005: 179). The anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (see Chapter 24, this volume), from fourteenth-century England, teaches devotees to pray by casting all creatures beneath a cloud of forgetting, so as to smite blindly "with a scharp darte of longing love" upon the cloud of unknowing where God dwells (*Cloud* 36). While this image distantly recalls Cupid's arrows, gender is irrelevant. The Byzantine hermits called hesychasts ("silent ones") aimed through ceaseless prayer to obtain a vision of the Uncreated Light which the Apostles beheld at Christ's transfiguration. All these mystics sought to empty the mind of distractions arising from the imagination, above all from sexual feelings.

Athwart these traditions runs the current of bridal, or better, theoerotic mysticism (Kieckhefer 213–217). Writers in this lineage see the soul's relationship with God as a tumultuous romance, with phases of longing, courtship, kisses, betrothal, passionate embraces, devastating absence, and ever-renewed seeking, culminating in spiritual marriage. Here gender comes into its own. The dominant paradigm is the heterosexual couple, with the masculine Christ as lover of the feminine Soul. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this discourse evolved in tandem with the secular literature of courtly love (Newman 1995: 137–167; 2003: 138–189). Both develop such themes as ennobling desire, sacrificial love-service, praise of the beloved's beauty, maturation through stages of courtship, and pleas for mercy despite one's unworthiness. Nevertheless, mystical writing did not simply echo worldly assumptions about gender, but opened a space for creative questioning and revision.

Within the rarely challenged heterosexual norm, variety abounds. Monks confessing their love for God generally preferred to feminize their souls rather than adopt a homoerotic paradigm. Thus a certain "queering" of the masculine self occurs. Alternatively, the male mystic might conceive the divine Beloved as female in the figure of Eternal Wisdom or the Virgin Mary. Women's mystical writing often displays a passionate sensuality, directed especially toward Christ in his humanity. But women also developed same-sex models of divinity. In fact, pairings of lover and beloved, both envisaged as female, are more common than male-male pairings. For some mystics, especially in the late Middle Ages, gender symbolism becomes so fluid and malleable that it offers a means to its own transcendence. In pursuit of the divine Beloved, the devotee is enabled, through metaphorical gender-bending, to move beyond both the limitations of bodily sex and formulaic ideas of divine gender.

The Classic Couple

Gendered language for the relationship of God and his people has deep roots in Scripture. In the Old Testament, the chosen people are personified as God's beloved son, his daughter, and his bride or wife. Interestingly, the latter is not always a positive image.

In Ezekiel 16, the prophet represents Jerusalem as an adulteress shamed and humiliated by her jealous spouse. Similarly, God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute so that they can enact a parable of Israel's faithlessness, rejection, and reconciliation. But a more loving portrait of God and his bride was extracted from the Song of Songs (see Chapter 2, this volume), a dramatic, highly erotic poem that mentions neither God nor Israel. Akin to ancient near eastern poetry that may have been linked to a goddess cult, the Song represents the affair of two lovers as a tender pastoral, though their drama includes an episode in which the woman, seeking her absent lover, is robbed and beaten. Because of its ancient origins, the love idyll of the Song displays a few surprising, non-patriarchal features that would inflect the imagery available to Christian mystics. For example, the female wooer is active and assertive, speaking more lines than her partner; the man is both king and shepherd, so the lovers appear sometimes to be of the same rank, at other times far distant; and the couple, though not yet married, revel in a passionate sexual relationship. In the history of exegesis, these traits of the biblical dialogue would offset patriarchal assumptions inherited from Greece and Rome, notably a view of man as active and rational, woman as passive and carnal.

Performed as a wedding entertainment in the time of Jesus, the Song of Songs entered the biblical canon on the strength of Rabbi Akiba's allegorical reading (see Chapter 8, this volume), which interpreted the bridegroom as God and the bride as Israel. Early Christian exegetes, inheriting this allegory, changed its referents on the basis of Ephesians 5, where Paul calls marriage "a great sacrament" symbolizing Christ and the church, and Revelation 19–22, which proclaims the wedding of the Lamb. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, the Alexandrian scholar Origen (d. 254) (see Chapter 10, this volume) for the first time read Christ's bride as both communal and individual: "whether she is the soul made after [God's] image or the church, she has fallen deeply in love with Him" (Origen 217). Origen, who castrated himself to teach women without fear of scandal, tellingly insists that the bride's love is purely spiritual. From this point onward, two assumptions governed all mystical readings of the Song. First, every soul is potentially Christ's beloved bride, a role she can play by performing in her own life the same drama the church enacts on a cosmic scale. But second, the biblical ode to love is meant only for celibates, who alone can achieve sufficient holiness and spiritual maturity to appreciate it. The sexually active – that is, the Christian laity – can never be worthy of the bride's sacred ardors. So, for the next thousand years, the Song of Songs became the exclusive property of monks and nuns.

The great explosion of bridal mysticism – and Song of Songs commentaries – came in the twelfth century, when dozens of exegetes used the Song as a peg to hang their theories of the soul's progress toward union with her celestial Lover. Around 1100, Honorius Augustodunensis produced the first Marian Song commentary, offering yet another version of the bride (Fulton 247–288). The Virgin Mary now emerged as both a figure of the church and an exemplar for God's chaste but passionate lovers. Henceforth the overlapping paradigms of church, Soul, and Virgin would give rise to innumerable ways of reading the bride's words and actions. Of all these commentaries, the eighty-six *Sermons on the Song of Songs* by Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), a Cistercian abbot (see Chapter 16, this volume), attracted the widest audience because of their eloquence and deeply personal tone, though for Bernard the church still overshadows

the Soul as "bride of the Word." So inexhaustible was this monk's ingenuity that he had barely reached the third chapter when he died, inspiring numerous continuators and imitators to complete the task. Although these monks wrote in Latin for a male audience, their work soon made its way into women's communities through translation and preaching. Canon law and ritual increasingly emphasized the nun's status as a bride of Christ, legally betrothed to him with veil and ring. This meant that nuns could easily adopt the mystical persona of bride in continuity with their ordinary lives, without the psychological acrobatics required of men assuming that role.

In Bernard's *Sermons* the deceptively simple paradigm of bride and bridegroom belies an extremely complex, fluid gender symbolism. For instance, the bride longs for a "kiss of the mouth," yet on a different plane, "the Father is he who kisses, the Son he who is kissed," and the kiss itself signifies the Holy Spirit (Bernard 1:46). Biblical figures including Mary Magdalene, the Psalmist, and the Apostle Paul, as well as Bernard himself, impersonate the bride. Among her attendants, the "daughters of Jerusalem," are "the repentant thief, the weeping sinner, the importunate Chanaanite woman, the woman caught in adultery, the man who sat at the customs house, the humble tax collector," and so forth (2:20). Both lovers have flowing breasts: the man's denote patience and forgiveness, the woman's, compassion and sympathy. The bridegroom fills the breasts of the bride with milk so that she in turn can teach abbots to be nurturing mothers to their monks (2:27). Thoughts of authority and discipline evoke the masculine, dependence and nurture the feminine, regardless of physical sex (Bynum 1982: 110–169).

For twelfth-century monks, policing gender roles mattered less than teaching the love of God as dynamic, constantly growing and deepening. Cistercians, Victorines (see Chapter 17, this volume), and Carthusians all charted itineraries of spiritual progress from beginner to proficient. Some of these relied on gender. For instance, Bernard's friend William of Saint-Thierry characterized a mature monk as one who had progressed from feminine soul (*anima*) to masculine spirit (*animus*): "when [the soul] begins to be not only capable but also in possession of perfect reason, it immediately renounces the feminine gender . . . For as long as it is *anima* it is quick to slip effeminately into the carnal; but the *animus* or spirit thinks only on what is virile and spiritual" (Newman 1995: 22–23). This kind of misogyny is not ubiquitous, but neither is it rare (Jantzen 109–122, 130–132). Bernard himself worked out several schemes, one of which traces the soul's maturation through three stages, from fear of punishment (the slave) to desire for reward (the mercenary) to selfless love (the son or the bride). Ascribed to the soul, masculinity is almost always a desirable trait, contrasted with feminine weakness or carnality. God's masculinity, on the other hand, is either taken for granted or offset by positive feminine traits. The male roles ascribed to him tend to be intimate ones – teacher, lover, father, child – rather than potentially threatening roles such as judge or warrior. Unlike preachers, mystical writers presupposed reverence. Their aim was to encourage intimacy with God rather than healthy (or not so healthy) fear.

In the thirteenth century, the practice of contemplation spread outward from the monasteries to include devout women called beguines, who lived in community but took no permanent vows. The spirituality of these northern European women resembled that of Franciscan and Dominican tertiaries in Italy, who followed an ascetic, penitential way of life and sought union with God. This was the great era of women's

mystical writing. Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282), a German beguine (see Chapter 20, this volume), wrote rapturously of the love-games God plays with his bride. He greets his beloved

> in courtly language that one does not hear in this kitchen, clothes her in the garments that one fittingly wears in a palace, and surrenders himself into her power . . . Then he draws her further to a secret place . . . because all alone with her he wants to play a game that the body does not know, nor the peasants at their plows, nor knights at their tournaments. (Mechthild 40–41)

The soul cannot speak of what she enjoys in the divine bridal chamber, but she grieves that "just when the game is at its best, one has to leave it" (41). In another vision, Christ asks her to strip naked – to cast off "fear and shame and all external virtues" – so that she may come to his bed clad in nothing but "noble longing and . . . boundless desire" (62). Mechthild as bride identifies with Mary, but also with the virgin church, whom she calls her "playmate" because "we both have the same Bridegroom" (146). Beyond the Song of Songs, she imagines erotic desire as the motive for creation itself. In the beginning the Father tells the Son, "I shall make a bride for myself who shall greet me with her mouth and wound me with her beauty" (114–115). As soon as this bridal soul is created, God takes a marriage vow: "I am the God of gods; you are the Goddess of all creatures, and . . . I shall never reject you" (115). Unfortunately, though, his bride betrays him with Satan, so the Father chooses Mary instead "that he might have something to love; for his darling bride, the noble soul, was dead" (50). Thus the Virgin in turn becomes Goddess (103, 110). Of all medieval mystics, Mechthild's may be the most thoroughly gendered cosmology. From one point of view, heaven's throne is occupied by the Trinity, but from another by God and his bride, understood alternatively as the Virgin, the church, and the Soul. The classic couple of theoerotic mysticism thus becomes an Eternal Couple, the King and Queen of Heaven.

Other women added their own distinctive notes to the bridal role. Angela of Foligno (d. 1309), a Franciscan (see Chapter 25, this volume), began her religious life by stripping naked before a crucifix as a sign of love and penance. Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) (see Chapter 22, this volume) gave the bridegroom the evocative name of "Far-Near." He comes to visit the Free Soul who has been "annihilated" by love – totally renouncing her will to plunge back into the divine abyss, where she was one with God before the world began. To such souls, the Far-Near grants a foretaste, sudden as a lightning flash, of eternal beatitude. The astonishing intimacy with God expressed by many medieval women recedes with the Protestant and Catholic reformations. Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), a saint of the Spanish Counter-Reformation (see Chapter 28, this volume), outlines the path to spiritual marriage in *The Interior Castle*. But unlike her medieval sisters, she frequently refers to Christ as "His Majesty." Even in the transports of love, she never forgets the grandeur of God: "although the Lord's presence is the most beautiful and delightful a person could imagine . . . this presence bears such extraordinary majesty that it causes the soul extreme fright" (Teresa 157).

Bridal mysticism remained a favorite path for Catholic nuns well into the twentieth century, but after the twelfth it was less often pursued by monks. One towering exception

was Denis the Carthusian (d. 1471), called the "Ecstatic Doctor," whose voluminous Song commentary summed up the whole medieval tradition. Another was Teresa's friend John of the Cross (d. 1591), a Spanish Carmelite (see Chapter 28, this volume) whose works became classic sources for Catholic mystical theology. John's *Spiritual Canticle* and *Ascent of Mount Carmel* expound the soul's bridal journey in the form of commentaries on his own lyric poems, inspired by the Song of Songs.

Queering the Soul

Despite the extravagant commentaries of Bernard and his peers, playing the bride's role was probably never as easy or straightforward for monks as for religious women. To identify with the bride, a monk had to reject masculine gender roles and accept the allegorical Soul as his stand-in (Latin *anima*, soul, is a feminine noun). Monks were in any case a kind of third gender in medieval society. Having renounced the defining features of manhood (marriage, procreation, and fighting), they were clean-shaven figures in skirts, performing domestic labors. Bernard himself characterizes his monks as female, warning them not to envy the more virile life of bishops: "our soft effeminate shoulders cannot be happy in supporting burdens made for men" (Bernard 1:84). Thinking of themselves this way must have facilitated the "queer" possibilities inherent in reading the bride allegorically. As Stephen Moore contends, the celibate monk "inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin: a male author who . . . internalizes a feminine persona so completely that he speaks fluently in her voice, feels with her emotions, and throbs with her sexuality" (Moore 338). Celibacy fostered a certain playfulness, intensity, and fluidity in the exploration of gender. Where bodily sexual expression of any kind is taboo, it matters less if one is male or female, gay or straight. These categories blur, freeing the language of passionate love for sacred appropriation in ever-shifting forms.

The Benedictine Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129), author of a lengthy Marian Song commentary, integrated the Virgin's imagined experience at the Incarnation with an oblique narrative about his own. After critics challenged this prolific exegete for presuming to offer new interpretations of Scripture, rather than repeating the church fathers, Rupert defended his inspiration and authority by recounting a series of dream visions. Some of these, related in the prologue to his commentary on Matthew, are stunningly erotic. In the first, he greets a crucifix which then comes to life. Accepting Rupert's salutation, Christ observes his desire for a kiss and, approving, cleaves the altar open so the monk can run inside. "When I had entered as quickly as I could," Rupert confesses, "I took hold of 'him whom my soul loves' and I held him, and embraced him, and kissed him eagerly for a long time. I sensed how pleasing he found this gesture of love, when in the midst of the kissing he opened his mouth, so that I could kiss him the more deeply" (Fulton 310). Later in the sequence Rupert dreams that God the Father kisses him with a "holy and divine pleasure" (311). To consummate these encounters with the Trinity, the Holy Spirit descends on the monk in the form of a luminous substance, "heavier than gold, sweeter than honey," which circles around "the womb of the interior man" until it is so full that it can hold no more (312). These experiences result in a mystical

pregnancy. Like Mary, Rupert's soul is so filled with the Word of God that he must bring it forth into the world – which he does in his tireless work as an exegete.

Long ignored but lately much studied, Rupert's homoerotic visions are rare in this genre. His dreams of embracing his Lord find an alternative and, in some ways, more typical expression through identification with Mary. Rupert's Song commentary is fascinated by her divine love affair, especially the moment when "my beloved put his hand through the hole, and my belly trembled at his touch" (Cant. 5:4). Rhetorically asking just what it was that Mary felt, Rupert answers his own question by relating the "secrets" of a certain young woman. Recognized by a contemporary as the monk's alter ego, this woman tells how, in a vision, she caressed her divine Lover's hand. Suddenly he thrust it through a hole in her breast and seized her heart, which, "leaping and dancing within that hand, rejoiced with ineffable joy" (Fulton 334–335). The same imaginary woman shares Rupert's experience of being embraced by the Crucified. Like the *anima* of so many Song commentaries, this fictional woman bridges the gap between Mary as God's paradigmatic bride and the writer and reader as aspiring brides. Though the sexuality is intense, the gender is fluid. Such gender-bending indicates why "theoerotic" is a better term than "bridal" mysticism, for that label understates the degree to which celibate men shared this form of spirituality.

Another virtuoso in the art is Henry Suso (d. 1366), a Dominican who studied with Meister Eckhart and devoted himself mainly to preaching and the pastoral care of women (see Chapter 23, this volume). Suso's autohagiography, *The Life of the Servant*, presents an idealized image of himself as an exemplar to imitate. Early in his religious life, the Servant is converted from lukewarmness to fervor when he falls in love with Eternal Wisdom, the creatrix revealed in the sapiential books of the Bible (Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom of Solomon). She becomes his soul's beloved, whom he woos in good courtly fashion – singing, offering flowers, and adorning a cross as a spiritual Maypole. Suso renews this affair in *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, which he wrote in German for a largely female readership. The book is a dialogue between the Servant and Eternal Wisdom, but the goddess soon unmasks herself as a persona of the suffering Jesus. As Wisdom modulates from female to male, the masculine Servant is feminized, becoming Wisdom's "daughter" and "poor serving maid." Thus, like Bernard and Rupert, Suso assumes a feminine subject position, but he does so for strategic ends – to give women a role model of their own sex and a masculine Beloved.

A few years later, Suso translated his *Little Book* into Latin, calling this revised and expanded work *The Clock of Wisdom*. Unlike its original, *The Clock* was meant for an international public of priests, monks, and friars. Accordingly, the Disciple resumes his masculine guise and Eternal Wisdom is more feminine than ever:

> one like the goddess of all beauty stood before me, blushing like a rose and gleaming with snowy brightness; and she shone more brightly than the sun . . . and said in the most dulcet voice, "Come unto me, all you who desire me, and take your fill of my produce. I am the mother of fair love and of fear, of knowledge and of holy hope." (Ecclus. 24:24–26; Newman 2003: 207)

Inviting the Disciple to enjoy her "deep kisses . . . bestowed with love by honey-flowing lips," Wisdom oscillates between the roles of alluring goddess-bride and crucified Savior.

At the end of the dialogue, she and the Disciple are solemnly wed, and God the Father becomes the Disciple's father-in-law.

In crafting Eternal Wisdom as a dual-gendered Spouse, Suso knew exactly what he was doing. As he explains in a prologue to *The Clock*, its author "changes his style in different ways according to what seems suited to the material. Now he presents the Son of God as bridegroom of the devout soul, and then he introduces the same as Eternal Wisdom betrothed to the just man" (Newman 2003: 207). Taken together, the German and Latin versions show that the heterosexual norm trumps specific gender roles. As a skilled rhetorician, Suso wished to present both male and female readers with a divine Beloved of the opposite sex, which he assumed would most effectively stir their desire. But the two versions also show how easily he could change the genders of both human disciple and divine Beloved. His God was no more inherently masculine than his soul was inherently feminine. Yet gender is not assigned randomly. Eternal Wisdom in her female guise is a celestial being, forever beautiful and seductive. It is she who inspires the devotee's ardor and rewards him with love at his journey's end. In male guise, the same Wisdom is the naked, suffering Jesus, abused by his torturers until "he had no comeliness or beauty . . . that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). Since Christianity is nothing but the way of the Cross, the only means to attain the glorious female Wisdom is to love and follow the crucified male Wisdom – in a Passion that is equal parts yearning and suffering.

A last word should go to the modern mystic who gave the transgendered *anima* a new lease on life. Carl Gustav Jung (d. 1961), the founder of analytical psychology, broke with Freud over several issues, including the value of religion. In one of his more controversial theories, Jung posited that to achieve psychological maturity, a person must come to terms with the unconscious, countersexual aspect of the psyche, called *anima* in men and *animus* in women. These terms are less symmetrical than they may appear. Naturalizing gender stereotypes, Jung connected women's animus with their capacity for assertiveness and ambition, leading some Jungians to dismiss feminists as "animus-driven." The anima, however, is a more numinous archetype. In continuity with the mystical tradition, it represents the affective, vulnerable, artistic, and spiritual component of the male psyche, offsetting a gender ideal based on aggression, secularism, and instrumental rationality. Jung's colleague, Marie-Louise von Franz, describes the anima archetype "as a mediator between the ego and the Self," or divine image. The "positive anima" is symbolized by such figures as Mary, Sapientia, and the bride of the Song of Songs (Jung 195). By revitalizing this tradition, Jungian psychology legitimized a range of countercultural masculinities, including lay male spirituality, at a time when religion of any kind was overwhelmingly gendered feminine.

Feminizing God

The mystical tradition has both encouraged men to adopt spiritual femininity and given the feminine Divine more prominence than any other religious discourse. Historically, her chief manifestations have been Wisdom (Sophia, Sapientia) and Love (Caritas, Minne, Amour). As a third we might name the Virgin Mary, who is revered as fervently

as any goddess – but Christian doctrine (if not always devotion) places her firmly on the human side. A more surprising avatar of the Divine Feminine, popular from the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, is the transgendered figure of Jesus our Mother. This Jesus emerges in the prayers and meditations of Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), plays a significant role in Cistercian writings, and receives the fullest theological treatment in Julian of Norwich (d. after 1416) (see Chapter 24, this volume).

Eternal Wisdom, the object of Suso's devotion, has long been available to devotees in both masculine and feminine dress (Newman 2003: 190–206). In the Old Testament, Sophia is a female figure, indebted to the goddesses Asherah and Isis. She is represented sometimes as daughter, sometimes as consort of God. In the New Testament, however, Paul and the evangelists identify her with Jesus, subtly but so effectively that Wisdom's role in creation shaped the earliest articulations of Christ's divinity. Yet her feminine gender remained an inescapable datum of Scripture. Beginning around the seventh century, her Old Testament praises came to be sung liturgically on Marian feasts, inspiring a convergence between Sophia and the Virgin. It was on this basis that pre-existence was first ascribed to Mary. Yet the older christological reading of Sophia remained current as well, making Wisdom an ambidextrous figure, both divine and human, female and male. Suso was unusual in exploiting this dual gender so deliberately. But numerous mystics invoked feminine Wisdom, often with Marian overtones, as God's intimate companion who mediates his presence to mortals.

As Sapientia, Wisdom presides over the cosmological speculations that intrigued such twelfth-century figures as Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille. Assimilated to fictive goddesses like Boethius's Lady Philosophy, she is allegorized as the mother of all arts and sciences, laying a foundation for Christian humanism. In Neoplatonic thought, Wisdom is the divine mind and womb of creation, holding the exemplars of every creature before they emerge in time. Mystics have long found exemplarism a congenial doctrine because it minimizes the distance between Creator and creature. Thinkers as diverse as John Scotus Eriugena (see Chapter 4, this volume), Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch, Bonaventure (see Chapter 19, this volume), Marguerite Porete (see Chapter 22, this volume), and Julian of Norwich have adopted it, often affirming the doctrine through feminine images of the Divine. Closely related is the idea of God's "eternal counsel" (Psalm 32:11, Vulgate). This mysterious verse was taken in the Middle Ages to mean that God planned before the foundation of the world to become incarnate and foreordained Mary as his mother. Hence only the Crucifixion, not the Incarnation, was contingent on the Fall. Like exemplarism in the broad sense, this specific version (the "absolute predestination of Christ") has been conducive to mystical theologies with an optimistic bent and a Marian cast. Among its champions are Rupert of Deutz, Hildegard, Robert Grosseteste, and Duns Scotus.

If Wisdom has a strong scriptural presence, the other great avatar of the feminine Divine emerges from the courtly tradition. Although the New Testament states that "God is love," or *caritas* (1 John 4:8), Love did not achieve goddess-like stature until the twelfth century. In his encomium *On the Praise of Charity*, Hugh of Saint-Victor (d. 1141) (see Chapter 17, this volume) personified Caritas as a divine, feminine force that, like Sapientia, coexists with God and even exercises authority over him:

O Charity, great is your power! You alone were able to draw God down from heaven to earth. How mighty is your chain by which even God could be bound, and man who had been bound broke the chains of iniquity! . . . We were still rebels when you compelled him, who obeyed you, to descend from the throne of his Father's majesty and take on the weakness of our mortality. You led him bound in your chains, you led him wounded by your arrows . . . You have wounded the Impassible, bound the Invincible, dragged the Changeless One down, made the Eternal One mortal. (Newman 2003: 147)

Hugh's eloquence contributed to the widespread representation of Love as a divine persona, uniquely attractive to an era fascinated by love in all its forms. Courtly poets meanwhile exalted their own love goddess, descended from Venus – called Minne in German and Dutch, Amour in French. As these vernacular deities converged with the Caritas of monastic tradition, the God of Christendom took on a compelling feminine face. Women mystics stood in the forefront of this emergence.

For Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), Caritas and Sapientia were interchangeable, though she invokes Caritas more often. The most prolific woman ever to write Latin, Hildegard composed extensive theological books inspired by her visions. In the most impressive of these, the *Liber divinorum operum*, Caritas appears as a winged, scarlet figure surmounted by the head of an older man (the Father) and holding a lamb (the Son), such that she herself takes the Spirit's place and proclaims:

I am the supreme and fiery force who kindled every living spark, and I breathed forth no deadly thing . . . And I am the fiery life of the essence of God: I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And, with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life . . . Mine is the blast of the resounding Word through which all creation came to be, and I quickened all things with my breath . . . for I am Life. Indeed I am Life, whole and undivided – not hewn from any stone, nor budded from branches, nor rooted in virile strength; but all that lives has its root in Me. (Newman 1987: 69–70)

Hildegard's sense of the universe as intensely alive, shimmering with vitality, expresses itself through potent images of the feminine Divine immanent in the very elements, as well as the human soul and the church. Elsewhere in the visionary's oeuvre, Caritas is a lovely maiden who holds the sun and moon in her hands and bears on her breast "an ivory tablet in which there appeared the form of a man, the color of sapphire; and all creation called this maiden Lady" (Newman 1987: 56). Wisdom is a radiant virgin, rooted like a tree in the fountain of life, but also a cosmic force with three all-embracing wings. Like other women, Hildegard sometimes used these powerful visions of feminine deity to legitimize her own authority, always a risky business for women.

For beguines writing in the vernacular, Lady Love fills multiple roles. Sometimes a "transcendent I" who personifies the mystic's own love for God, she is also a feminine alter ego of Christ and a name for the Absolute, the ultimate unity in which lover merges with Beloved (Newman 1995: 153). Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* begins with a dialogue between Minne and the Soul, who praises Love's power in terms much like Hugh of Saint-Victor: "Lady Love, you struggled many a year

before you forced the exalted Trinity to pour itself utterly into the humble virginal womb of Mary" (Mechthild 39). In her absolute power over God and the Soul, Minne provides common ground between the Creator's plenitude and the creature's poverty. Although the Soul berates Love for robbing her of childhood and youth, honor and strength, riches and friends, Love counters that she has given her in return sublime knowledge and heavenly freedom. If that is not enough, she adds, "then take me . . . [and] in addition you may demand God and all his kingdom" (40).

Hadewijch (mid-thirteenth century) (see Chapter 22, this volume) was a more speculative thinker and a gifted poet. Though she wrote in Dutch, she seems to have read both theological Latin and literary French. With a virtuosity at gender-bending equal to Suso's, she played the roles of bride, warrior, troubadour, and queen in her lifelong quest to "live love with Love." Adopting a Neoplatonic model of emanation and return (see Chapter 4, this volume), Hadewijch saw the Christian life as a never-ending dialectical process. The soul must continually forsake the bliss of union to embark with Christ's humanity on earthly service. But time and again she is ecstatically engulfed by Minne, even as Christ returns to his Father. The outbound movement of virtue and charity causes the soul great suffering, for it requires separation from God, but this leads to a deeper union as she identifies more profoundly with Christ, the suffering servant. In this phase the soul struggles to satisfy the harsh demands of Minne, though (like secular poets) she often rebels against her service. Hadewijch immortalized this quest in her *Stanzaic Poems*, modeled on trouvère lyrics. Minne replaces the trouvère's haughty, irresistible Lady, continually postponing her favors, while Hadewijch takes the role of knight errant:

I ride my proud steed
And consort with my Beloved in supreme joy,
As if all beings of the North, the South, the East,
And the West were captive in my power.
And suddenly I am unhorsed, on foot.
– What use is it, alas, to recount my misery? (Hadewijch 153)

So unpredictable is Minne! But if her absence is painful, her presence can be even more so, as without warning, she hurtles the soul back into God: "Love is terrible and implacable, devouring and burning without regard for anything. The soul is contained in one little rivulet; her depth is quickly filled up; her dikes quickly burst" (291). Love bestows lasting pain and sudden, barely endurable pleasure.

These examples illustrate both the instability of gender and the variety of meanings attached to the feminine Divine. She does not represent any one trait, but is simply God in feminine form, with all the attributes of divinity: transcendent and immanent, implacable and humble, life-creating, all-encompassing, self-emptying Fullness. Today, the best-known of her medieval exemplars may be Julian of Norwich's Mother Jesus. In her *Revelation of Love*, the English recluse developed a challenging theology grounded in visions she experienced during a near-fatal illness in 1373. These centered on Christ's Passion, but Julian continued to ponder them until, twenty or thirty years later, she rewrote her vision-text as a profoundly speculative work. The question that most troubles

her is why God in his providence did not prevent original sin, "for then it seemed to me that all should have been well." Christ famously replies that "sin is behovely [fitting, necessary], but all shall be well . . . and all manner of thing shall be well" (Julian 209). To explain how this can be, Julian adds to her original text a lengthy section featuring Christ as Mother. Significantly, she never claims to have had a vision of Mother Jesus. Rather, the image is one that she introduces to clarify another vision. The divine maternity reassures her that, despite sin, we are never separated from God's love, but sheltered in it as safely as a child in the womb and heart of its mother.

Julian's thought blends two distinct theological traditions about divine maternity. One we have already encountered: Christ as Word of the Father is the eternal Wisdom that enfolds all creation. Julian perceives this enclosure as womblike: "the almighty truth of the Trinity is our Father . . . and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother, in whom we are all enclosed" (297). The second, more devotional strand interprets the painful bloodletting of Christ as the generative blood of childbirth: "In the taking of our nature he quickened us, and in his blessed dying upon the cross he bore us to endless life. And from that time, and now, and ever shall until doomsday, he feeds us and fosters us, just as the high, sovereign kindness of motherhood wills, and as the kindly need of childhood asks" (321). Since a mother's love is the "nearest, readiest, and surest," Jesus in his intimate care for us is like a mother. Yet earthly mothers can only "bear us to pain and to dying," while "our true mother Jesus . . . bears us to joy and to endless living" (313). In the eucharist, he feeds us tenderly as with milk, and in his wounded side – providing access to his heart – he reveals "a fair, delectable place, large enough for all mankind that shall be saved" (201). The side-wound is also womblike, for blood and water poured from it when redeemed humanity was born. Hence Jesus is Mother in both his divinity (as Wisdom) and his humanity (as sheltering, giving birth, and nursing in a very maternal body). Yet this Mother remains the Son, to whom Julian applies masculine pronouns. Thus she keeps the dual gender of God in sharp focus, while scrupulously avoiding terms that would ascribe any gender to the soul. Unlike the theoerotic tradition, Julian's mysticism does not exalt an elect, privileged bride, but promotes the solidarity of all humankind as God's beloved child.

These traditions did not end with the Middle Ages. Sophia in particular has retained a powerful if submerged presence in esoteric Christianity (Schipflinger; Versluis). The Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme (d. 1624) rediscovered the "Noble Virgin Sophia" as "body of the Holy Trinity," vessel of divine imagination, and celestial bride, whom he praised in a dense, riddling style. German pietism, theosophy, and virtually all esoteric schools are in his debt. The early twentieth century saw another revival of Sophia theologies, all struggling to give intellectual form to Goethe's "Eternal Feminine" (*das Ewig-Weibliche*). Vladimir Soloviev (d. 1900) (see Chapter 32, this volume), a mystical philosopher steeped in Boehme and German romanticism, had a vision of Sophia while studying at the British Museum. He made her "eternal divine femininity" central to his recasting of Russian Orthodox theology, founding a controversial school of "sophiologists" including Pavel Florensky (d. 1937), Pavel Evdokimov (d. 1970), and most important, Sergei Bulgakov (d. 1944). These theologians cited the Byzantine cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) as a precedent – hotly contested – for their efforts to feminize the Trinity. Catholic mystics such as Paul Claudel (d. 1955), Teilhard de Chardin

(d. 1955), and Thomas Merton (d. 1968) (see Chapter 34, this volume) developed their own "theologies of the feminine" with a marked romantic streak. While most Third Wave feminists would dismiss these as essentialist, Sophia was revived yet again by Christian spiritual feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, who found her appealing as a focus of gynocentric worship and communion with their Jewish and Pagan sisters (Matthews).

Gendered Assumptions

In closing I revisit the classic typologies of mysticism, for these often conceal gender stereotypes prejudicial to women. Influential twentieth-century theorists such as Evelyn Underhill have followed a long Catholic spiritual tradition, descended from Teresa and John of the Cross, in ranking apophatic, imageless, purely noetic experiences of God above those that involve images or bodily manifestations, such as rapture. This hierarchy reflects a deep-seated tendency to value intellect, affect, and physical sensations in descending order. Often the binary of apophatic and cataphatic ways is conflated with a distinction between "intellectual" (or "speculative") and "affective" mystics. Although women have participated in shaping these categories, most female mystics have been relegated to the affective category, as if incapable of the highest flights of mystical intuition – which require complete abstraction from the body and the senses. More recently, a vogue for Jacques Derrida's "negative theology" has further privileged the apophatic way.

This typology lies open to critique on many grounds. One might object that body-mind dualism distorts the psychosomatic wholeness of human beings; that definitions of mysticism tend to serve the interests of ecclesiastical power, that is, of men (Jantzen); that it is not the historian's business to judge the spiritual lives of the dead; and that a focus on "mystical experience" as such disregards moral and spiritual concerns that mystics themselves consider more important. Moreover, it leads us to neglect what we can actually study – texts – in a futile attempt to retrieve psychological experience, which we cannot study (Jantzen; McGinn 2005). Empirically, a close reading of mystics shows, on the one hand, that "speculative" does not always mean "apophatic," and on the other, that such categories constitute a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. Even the most apophatic mystics must use some images (abyss, desert, cloud), while even the most cataphatic can be quite abstract. Julian, for example, says that she "saw God in a point . . . by which sight I saw that he is in all things . . . [and] does all that is done" (Julian 163). Marguerite Porete, whose mysticism of "annihilation" is no less apophatic than Eckhart's, expresses her ideas through the emotionally charged idiom of courtly love. Hadewijch is more speculative than Bernard of Clairvaux, and Rupert of Deutz more affective than Hildegard. In short, if such categories are problematic, their gendering is even more so.

Finally, the explosion of late twentieth-century feminist scholarship has both reinforced and challenged older ideas. Caroline Bynum's landmark study, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, argued that medieval holy women shared men's tendency to identify the feminine with the body, but found positive spiritual meaning in bodily experience,

especially in suffering. Rather than internalizing misogyny, women who fasted savagely or endured chronic illness assimilated their sufferings to the crucified, feminized, redemptive body of Christ. While this thesis has proved extremely fruitful, it is important to distinguish between mystical writings and sacred biographies. Much of Bynum's evidence came from female saints' lives, authored by men who did not necessarily represent their subjects as they saw themselves. Further, while many women cultivated pain, others emphatically did not. Though Hildegard was often sick, she encouraged good medical care rather than a spirituality of pain. Julian received her visions while desperately ill, but held that God wants believers to be joyful; this life holds suffering enough without seeking more. Marguerite Porete, who took no interest in the body, may have conceived her radical doctrine that the Free Soul "takes leave of the virtues" as a way to liberate women's bodies from the pain that conventional piety asked of them (Hollywood 199–200).

The permutations of gender in mystical texts, and among mystics themselves, are endlessly interesting. Nevertheless, it is wise to remember that this category is not ultimate. As the great Jewish theologian Martin Buber argued, a human being and God can only be related as two subjects, an "I" and a "Thou" – not subject and object, or "I" and "It." (Buber chose "Thou" as the singular, intimate form of the pronoun, *du* rather than *Sie*.) Any "I" who says "Thou" to a lover must be present as a whole to a whole. This is true above all of the divine, eternal Thou, who sustains all relationships and is knowable only through dialogue and presence. Significantly, the pronouns "I" and "Thou" in English, as in German, are ungendered. Whenever an "I" speaks to a "Thou," gender is grammatically absent, for "he" and "she" emerge only at the distance of third-person narration. These pronouns thus reveal the difference between a direct, first-person relationship with God, experienced in prayer or mystical union, and the narrative produced when that experience is recounted to another. As soon as the third person intervenes, the I-Thou relationship becomes a story about He–and–I or I–and–She. It is this necessary, but distorting gap between the experience of relationship and the language of narration that gives gender, fascinating though it is, more prominence than most mystics would say it deserves.

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CHAPTER 4
Platonism

Willemien Otten

For anyone reflecting seriously on the tradition of Christian mysticism in the medieval west, it is hard not to notice the hold that Platonism has exercised on that tradition throughout much, if not all, of the period. Upon closer inspection, it appears there are actually two divergent, be it equally central ways – which I shall call below the inherent and the forensic – in which Platonism has left a lasting imprint on the Christian mystical tradition. The aim of this particular essay on Platonism, which for me will include the wider Platonic influence, is first of all to survey and analyze this twofold impact of Platonism, dwelling on the different approaches to the mystical quest which it yields. This will lead to an assessment of their relative importance as we survey the developing medieval mystical tradition. I shall limit my analysis to the impact of Platonism on the tradition of Christian mysticism in the medieval west, bringing in the tradition of ancient Christianity and the east for comparative purposes.

Hoping that the proposed approach will facilitate a more nuanced way of thinking through the medieval mystical tradition, I want to state by way of preliminary comment that I take medieval Christian mysticism to have a rather wide, i.e., non-doctrinal sense. My primary reason for doing so is that I want to emphasize the capacious attitude with which Christianity, thereby impacting Christian mysticism, has been surprisingly open to outside influences. Although I cannot elaborate in full on what may seem a rather sweeping statement, I tend to regard the Christian religion, notwithstanding its claims to scriptural revelation, as a complex intellectual construct involving both teaching and practice, and allowing for both communal and individual expression. Seeing the constructed and flexible nature of the Christian religion as one of the major reasons why the impact of Platonism could be so widespread and pervasive from fairly early on, we should add the malleability of Platonism itself as playing a role of almost equal importance. Taken together, the dance between Christianity and Platonism in the Middle Ages unfolds very much as a tango for two. Although it is not always clear who is leading and who is following, it has generated a steady intellectual excitement, cap-

tivating the interest of medieval readers and religious practitioners from various backgrounds, while at the same time continuing Platonism's mystical hold.

As for the twofold impact of Platonism on Christian mysticism mentioned above, I take Platonism first of all as having provided Christian mysticism with its intellectual scaffolding by outfitting it early on with a set of basic and elemental intellectual principles that would continue to play a role of importance not just in medieval mysticism but in Christian thought more widely. To that end, this chapter's first section will comment on the inherent Platonic aspects of Christian mysticism. If for a long time Christian thought developed according to Platonic fault lines, which in my view was roughly the case between 200 and 1200 CE, the introduction of Aristotle whose thought would come to underlie the new scholastic method in the west marked a veritable sea change. From the 1200s onwards Aristotelian thought held sway for centuries until under the influence of the Renaissance, which actually saw a Platonic comeback, and of the Reformation with its rediscovery of the importance of literary sources, Christianity underwent a rapid process of biblical retooling leading to what may well have been its first biblical makeover ever. It is from this time onward that Christianity adopts the kind of nonfoundational philosophical character that has allowed it since to negotiate the impact of the respective cultural crises of Enlightenment, modernity, and postmodernity.

If, by contrast, we take more of a bird's-eye view of Christianity's development as having been marked down the centuries by a succession of intellectual influences, an alternative view of Platonism emerges, one in which its influence is seen as quintessentially forensic. As such the influence of Platonism is comparable to other influences, the main difference perhaps being its greater prominence and historical dominance early on. In this second view, the influence of Platonism is seen as potentially compromising, even embarrassing the tradition of Christianity and Christian mysticism. Instead of being at least co-formed by Platonism, Christianity is here seen as a religion that demonstrated a steady revelatory and/or biblical character from its inception, but needed time to come out from under its Platonic shadow. The perception underlying this latter scenario, which takes hold especially in the Reformation era, where it is directed against Aristotelian influence, is that Platonic and other influences cannot but rival with and taint Christianity more than that they stand in its service. This chapter's second section will be devoted to an analysis of this view of extraneous Platonic influence, as we will pay special attention to those elements by which it is perceived, if not rejected, as a kind of *Fremdkörper* (alien body) in the tradition of Christian mysticism.

In a third section, our focus will be on the thought of Johannes Scottus Eriugena and of Bonaventure (see Chapter 19, this volume) as representing two medieval cases of Platonic influence. Eriugena and Bonaventure resemble each other in that they mix a unique take on medieval mysticism with a certain representative quality for Platonic thought at large. In this way their cases also allow us to draw a fruitful comparison with two earlier and more famous cases of late ancient Platonic influence, namely, Augustine (see Chapters 13 and 14, this volume) and Dionysius (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume), which shaped if not determined the medieval Platonic reception to no small degree. I will use the third section on Eriugena and Bonaventure to bring the aforementioned assessments of Platonism in further conversation with each other. As we move

towards a deeper evaluation of the meaning of Platonism for Christian mysticism, crea-
tive imaging rather than schematic confrontation may well be the most fruitful way
to proceed. Finally, it is in this section that the hermeneutical meaning of Christology
will be thematized. As indicated by Augustine in *Confessions* 7.19.25–7.21.27, incarna-
tion is itself foreign to Platonic thought[1] but it proved instrumental in his conversion
and would be of remarkable consequence for medieval Platonic mysticism.

In a brief fourth section, I will formulate a historical assessment of the overall role
of Platonism, as seen from the perspective of medieval Christian mysticism. By way of
conclusion I will comment briefly on the connection between gender and Platonism in
late medieval mysticism.

Preceding our first section on Christianity and Platonism, however, a few introduc-
tory comments on my non-doctrinal view of medieval mysticism are in order. Contrary
to what may be surmised, I do not thereby want to distance medieval mysticism from
medieval scholasticism. It is a serious misunderstanding in my view – and one that I
would like to correct, since it is rather grave in its persistence – to think that mysticism
and scholasticism are by definition mutually exclusive, even though I realize that recent
interest in medieval mysticism may well feed on their distinction and, what is more,
assume their underlying contradiction. Yet the adequacy of such a view for a deeper
and better understanding of medieval mysticism is very much in doubt. Not only did
there not exist the same kind of complementary relationship between mysticism and
scholasticism as there seems to have existed between scholasticism and monasticism,
with the latter two representing distinct intellectual and institutionalized movements
whose philosophical *modus operandi* was closely tied to their chosen locations – the
cloister as distinct from the school or university – but it should be acknowledged that
the most eminent medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) (see Chapter 23, this
volume), was also a scholastic thinker *par excellence* (Turner 137–185; Sells 146–179).
What is clear is that scholasticism, Eckhart's thought included, is deeply influenced
by the thought of Aristotle, while the earlier medieval intellectual tradition, including
the monastic mindset, is more Platonically oriented. But while the mystical quest inside
Christianity *qua* origin had a more natural affinity with Plato than with Aristotle, we
should not infer that medieval mysticism is therefore by definition Platonic. Not only
does the Dominican tradition to which Eckhart but also Albert the Great and Thomas
Aquinas belong simply prove otherwise (McGinn 2005), but the acuity of Eckhart's
trained scholastic mind may well have contributed to the intellectual audacity and
transgressive nature of his mystical vision.

A related reason for correcting the misunderstanding of mysticism and scholasti-
cism as mutually exclusive is that I want to nuance the idea that medieval mysticism
by definition prioritizes love and faith – each of them primary theological virtues and
as such key components of most medieval mystical quests – above reason or intellect.
Medieval mysticism has a surprisingly rational and intellectual profile, especially in its
Platonic guise. We may qualify this view by adding that medieval mysticism, not unlike
Plato himself, uses reason in a wide-ranging, evocative, symbolic, and not only instru-
mental role. Where we find mysticism and scholasticism parting ways perhaps is not in
any assumed contrast between love and intellect, but rather in the fact that in the final
analysis their respective uses of reason are profoundly different, with mysticism seeing

reason as a friend and partner, and scholasticism mobilizing it as a strategic ally. Scripture and tradition also play important roles, in addition to reason, as the other two staples of the medieval *outillage mental* (intellectual paradigm). For now, however, I want to uphold the statement that both scholasticism and mysticism each display a refined, highly developed and technical, but not therefore contrasting, approach. In this way, much more than might be expected from the outset, we can elevate the discussion of medieval mysticism beyond the perfunctory stalemate of faith or love versus reason, as we set out to find a way to bridge the different valuations of its Platonic ingredients.

Christian Mysticism and Platonism: Inherence and Inheritance

Christian mysticism begins with Scripture. Notwithstanding the direct revelation to, in, and by Jesus Christ on which the Christian religion bases itself, it is through its literary sources, namely the letters of Paul and the gospels, that word about Christ the Word (*Logos*) and Savior spread across the Mediterranean. Not merely new ones, Christ's words consciously hark back to and build upon the Hebrew Scriptures. As a result, the proclamation of Christianity harbors an inherent hermeneutical quality. The search for right interpretation mingled with the tension that separated the new Christian communities advocating a stable institutional structure from those wanting them to be inspired by a prophetic, charismatic drive. Gnostics, heretics, proto-orthodox and orthodox Christians – however much these groups differed from each other – all shared the desire to anchor their views in Scripture, even if for some this meant writing their own. With the ongoing institutionalization of the church, however, came the codification of its texts. This raised the threshold for textual interpretation, now to be limited to the canon, and increased the value placed on Christian hermeneutics.

   In the Mediterranean culture in which early Christianity thrived, other authoritative texts had been interpreted as well, notably the Homeric texts. It was in this other textual world that Platonism had inserted itself, quickly dominating the art of Homeric interpretation through its mastery of allegory. In Philo of Alexandria, it had extended allegory to the reading of the Pentateuch (Armstrong 137–157). In all this it seemed Platonism projected something that nascent Christianity lacked: a coherent storyline linking its texts, consisting of a cosmology, a soteriology, and guidelines for the moral life. The encounter between Christianity and Platonism was so fruitful because Christian interpreters could borrow elements from the Platonic storyline to solidify their own story of creation and salvation. Platonism and Christianity thus existed side by side until the fourth century, when the matrix of ancient culture shifted and Platonism came under the influence of the Christian exegetical tradition (Young 285–299). There is no denying that this had been prepared by a long tradition of reading Christian texts Platonically, whereby they were opened up to a wider audience and gradually inducted into ancient culture.

   Yet whereas a storyline projects a largely horizontal, historical plot of communal redemption, Christian mysticism, however one wants to define it, is permeated by a strong vertical, individual drive for the divine, which was prototypically foreshadowed

in Paul's ascent to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4. Following the insight formulated by Augustine in *Soliloquies* 1.2.7 we may summarize Christian mysticism in the medieval period as revolving about God and the soul: their encounter, their conversation, their embrace, leading to their eventual union.[2] Where Platonism and Christianity met and mixed in earnest in late antiquity, to the effect that it became increasingly difficult to tell them apart, is where we see the first powerful Christian mystical vision arise. This occurred when the Christian exegetical storyline from creation to resurrection, soon to be instituted as its normative salvation history, became intertwined with a parallel vertical approach to God. Origen of Alexandria (185–254 CE) (see Chapter 10, this volume) was the first Christian Platonic mystic of this kind as – equipped with a profound knowledge of Platonic philosophy, honed philological skills, and a keen allegorical intuition – he turned scriptural interpretation radically inward (Armstrong 182–192; Young 186–213). Creating a dwelling space for the divine in the royal bedchamber as depicted in the Song of Songs, Origen strove for direct intimacy between the divine and the soul, whereby he linked the tripartite Pauline division of the human into body, soul and spirit with the letter-spirit divide of the biblical text. The well-known bridal mysticism that developed in the medieval west as a subset of the larger Augustinian quest of the soul for God ultimately had its cradle in Platonic Alexandria (McGinn 1991: 108–130; Matter 20–48).[3]

When we contemplate the question why accomplished Christian exegetes like Origen in addition to St. Paul's anthropological scheme also depended on and even promoted the use of such seemingly obfuscating Platonic principles as, in descending order, the One above Being, the *Logos*, the *Nous* or Mind, the *Psyche* or Soul, and Matter or Non-Being, the suggestion presents itself that these principles persisted as a helpful spiritual X-ray of cosmic reality. Propping up and fully intertwined with their exegesis, they allowed Christians like Origen to see themselves in harmony with the cosmos that surrounded them, while they saw the cosmic structure simultaneously as being mirrored inside themselves. The unitive visionary hold that this philosophical X-ray offered, whose hierarchies became triadically multiplied between the Middle Platonism of Philo and Origen, through the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (d. 270) and Proclus (d. 485), to the ecclesial and celestial triadic hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. c. 485–525), served as more than an auxiliary tool to be dispensed with as soon as the Christian message of redemption behind it was grasped. Instead, the structure of this Platonic X-ray remained consistently attractive for Christians, the more so the more Christ's actual *parousia* seemed delayed. Just as we know the bones on an X-ray to be enveloped by muscle tissue and flesh, so the Platonic principles were seen as embedded in an ever more refined web of exegetical or, in the case of Dionysius and Maximus Confessor, liturgical interconnections. Lodged in an inner textual world, they beckoned and guided Christian readers to an ever-deeper intimacy with the divine, which was seen as lurking underneath the biblical text and beyond the horizon of history. In short, the vision offered by the Platonic X-ray came close to the eschatological promise contained in Christianity itself.

It is in the never-ceasing drive to unearth a deeper, hidden truth that we see a profound natural affinity emerge between Platonism and Christian mysticism. This affinity explains the Christian adoption of further Platonic ground rules, such as the valuation

of the intellect above the senses, the One above the many, and the passive above the active, all of which resonate well with the Christian impulse to find unity with the divine in an outwardly fragmented and lost world. For just as Christians knew from the gospel that being in this world did not mean being of it (John 15:19), so the Platonic thinker always needed to peer underneath the surface, in search of a deeper, more permanent truth.

It is perhaps for reasons of natural affinity that the matter of heresy was at first not a grave concern in the increasing coalescence of Christian and Platonic thought. Since Plotinus resented the Gnostics as much as orthodox Christians did, Christian intellectuals were not perceived as straying from the trodden path when embracing a Neoplatonic outlook. The technical expertise involved in applying the correct Pauline distinction between the letter that kills and the spirit that vivifies (2 Corinthians 3:6) precluded the possibility of easy shortcuts to salvation. Adding a measure of verifiability, it guaranteed that Christian mysticism remained a textual affair, embedded in an ever-expanding exegetical matrix that, in its turn, was supported by a growing network of Christian communities.

It is inside this orthodox communal structure that, following the lead of Philo and Origen, a class of Christian intellectuals begins to develop who were specialists in decoding the dynamic interplay between letter and spirit, exterior and interior, world and word, appearance and reality, body and soul (and spirit), and who thereby charted a more individual and, in the case of Origen, at times contested course. Not surprisingly, the early Christian intellectual thought that developed against this background coincided with Platonic thought, while admitting Stoic and other influences as well. From roughly the late third through the sixth century, therefore, it generally seemed as if there was little difference between a Christian intellectual and a Christian mystic: both were exegetically precise, theologically oriented, and Platonically versed. Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite in the east are cases in point, but so are Ambrose and Gregory the Great, with the latter directly inspired by Origen's allegory of the Song of Songs. It would take until the high Middle Ages and the creation of a separate intellectual class in the cathedral schools and universities before the mystical dimension ceded before a theology that was decidedly non-mystical. As women were excluded from this new class, just as they were from the medieval schools, it is no surprise that it is especially among women that medieval mysticism began to thrive after the twelfth century.

It is important to realize that the Platonism that was to influence Christianity projected the overtly religious, even monotheistic outlook of Middle- and Neoplatonism. Representing successive strands of Platonic interpretation, Middle- and Neoplatonic authors often resorted to Homeric interpretation, by which they aimed at cementing Plato's legacy and at reconciling Plato and Aristotle. Consequently, there is a degree of Aristotelianism lodged inside medieval Platonic Christian mysticism, such as a role for the senses as the windows of the soul. This inherent Aristotelianism may also explain Boethius' translation of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, his introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*, and lies behind his unfinished project to unite Plato and Aristotle. As is clear from Augustine's ideas about Christ as the soul's inner teacher in his *On the Teacher*, the meaning of Platonic anamnesis had lost its universal appeal, and new ways of linking

fragmented sense information to the unity of a deeper truth were needed. It is here that Dionysius' interlocking system of celestial and ecclesial hierarchies in the east sets a new standard that, especially after Eriugena's ninth-century translation and commentary, would also influence the west, no doubt aided by Dionysius' reputation as follower of St. Paul, and even more important, as martyr-saint of France.

It is in Augustine of Hippo (354–430), however, that we meet the first representative Christian mystic of the west: a Christian bishop who embraced a profoundly Platonic intellectual orientation and who was thoroughly exegetical. His desire that the soul unite with God no longer depended on the Logos, however, as it did in the Middle-Platonic outlook of Origen, but on the biblical Incarnate Christ, fittingly called *mediator*, after which it received an overtly Trinitarian elaboration. In consonance with Neoplatonic triadic preference, but inspired rather by an embryonic Christian Trinitarianism, and fueled by Scripture's emphasis on God as love in 1 John 4:8, Augustine situated the desire for God in humanity's Trinitarian psychological structure. In the various Trinitarian psychological models that Augustine espoused, the Platonic imprint is indelible. We famously find the Father represented by memory, the fertile receptacle and near-passive storehouse of infinite images, while the Son is represented by the intellect, harking back to the Logos, and the Spirit is represented by the will, more active than passive (*De Trin.* 15.23.43, cf. McGinn 1988). The assumption of an inner life to the divine Trinity ruled out any Origenian subordinationist tendencies.

In terms of western Christian mysticism Augustine's *Confessions* are an important milestone in the way they combine the outward journey of life, sketched on a metahistorical level in his *City of God* but here laid out in the form of the soul's journey to God. Modern fascination with the autobiographical and experiential aspects of Augustine's journey – he mentions touching on the divine in the so-called vision of Ostia (*Conf.* 9.10.23–25) – as well as with the need to pinpoint his exact moment of conversion, has directed readers away from the way in which his mysticism speaks about cosmic redemption in almost Origenian style, as is evidenced in the last three books. Yet Augustine does so in terms of Genesis rather than Plato's *Timaeus*, attention to which would nonetheless thrive in the Middle Ages and merge seamlessly with Genesis. What animated both Augustinian journeys, the individual-historic and the cosmic, nesting the one in the other, is the Platonic pattern of procession and return, seen in more Pauline terms as fall and redemption. In this pattern the source of reality lies with the singular initiative of the divine, as the universe descends and extends from there, while imposing on those humans capable of philosophical insight the moral need to point the way back to God not just for themselves but for the entire universe in their retinue. Whether reality is seen as flowing out through the plethora of Platonic principles on the spiritual X-ray or structured according to the days of Christian creation in Genesis made little difference. Still, substantial differences in the valuation of the human creature remain, as we will next analyze the sources of tension between Platonism and Christian mysticism.

Christian Mysticism and Platonism: Tensions and Suspense

Depending on the degree to which one sees Platonism as consonant with Christianity, and on the flexibility of one's hermeneutical take on its founding biblical corpus, various

tensions divide the respective views of Christianity and Platonism. Given that, historically, Platonism was so foundational for Christian mysticism, these tensions tend to impact one's interpretation of what qualifies as *bona fide* mystical, which is why I want to address some of them here. My aim is not to pass judgment, but to bring out from a historical perspective where potential frictions between Platonism and Christianity have arisen in the past or are currently detected, whereby to refine our historical assessment of the Platonic contribution to Christian mysticism.

Traditionally it has been argued that there were two insuperable differences that divided Christianity and Platonism. One of these touches on the difference between creation and emanation, while the other involves the status of the human being (Armstrong 425–431). In what follows I will discuss the cosmological and the anthropological problem in order.

In terms of cosmology, the operative term generally associated with Platonism is the concept of emanation, which has generally been seen as standing in opposition to the Christian notion of creation. Accordingly, in Platonism we do not find a personal God who created the world and all its creatures through divine will. Instead, the eminence of the Platonic One is seen as so majestic that it transcends even being itself, thereby relegating everything below itself inevitably to a lower level, a shadowy reality. Still, it is the divine that calls those lower levels into being, if not by means of the will, then through the overflowing (i.e., emanation) of its fullness, which causes them to be, almost as if they are rest products. It has always struck me that this pejorative comparison is driven by a prior condemnation of Platonism as pagan, as Platonism obviously does not factor in the biblical God of Genesis. Yet it fails to take account of the richly variegated spectrum of divine activity in late antiquity, as in Christianity one likewise has to aspire to higher forms of reality for greater insight, for an escape from the shadows and fogs of every day existence. This is admittedly not so because of a negative valuation of matter, as was the Platonic view, but because of the fall of Adam, which affected not just humanity but all of the cosmos.

In both cases, that of Christian mysticism and Platonism, the escape from the shadows takes place through an upward drive, which in Platonism is guaranteed through the inbuilt concept of participation, whereby the lower strata of reality still connect to the higher ones in and through, rather than despite, their lowly status. In a more individualized fashion, the concept of participation would become a major medieval mystical concept, allowing mystics to make swift and creative interconnections between the highest angels and the lowest animals. But it also allows for greater moral depth and intimacy with the divine, as when Augustine can call God *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me) (*Conf.* 3.6.11), suggesting that on the heels of Christ's mediation an ensouled intimacy developing along Trinitarian lines can overcome and even eliminate hierarchy, crossing the supposedly unbridgeable gap between the transcendent creator of Christianity and the world of creation.

My suggestion is to table any notion of a hard and fast difference between creation and emanation, and to look in open fashion for the different ensouled patterns whereby the divine is made to relate to the cosmos. A chain of hierarchies, such as in Dionysius, presents us with one such pattern: the world of triads and/or Trinity with another. Throughout both patterns one senses the push and pull of the divine, distancing itself

from the cosmos, causing fragmentation, alienation and even despair, only to draw it nigh again in an ever expanding and retracting pattern. To the extent that this zigzag pattern interrupts a straight ascent, Christian mysticism is thoroughly Platonic.

Even more tension between heterodox Platonism and orthodox Christianity emerges when we think about their respective cosmic end goals. Origen was famously condemned for his sense of apocatastasis (restoration of all things at the end of time), as everything would be allowed to return to God but could consequently fall away again; a similar closeness between the world of nature and the divine was assumed by Platonic thinkers in the twelfth century, as a result of which they were condemned as pantheistic. In what seems another guise of the same difference, Platonic thought as essentially cyclical is often contrasted with Christian mysticism as uniquely historical. But the question arises whether Platonism does not allow for a unique expression of the cycle of life, while the Christian mystic must allow for a certain repeatability of the mystical quest in order to be able to reappropriate his or her own vision and open it up to others.

As the Middle Ages progressed, however, the emphasis in Christian mysticism decidedly switches from a more balanced treatment of procession and return to a focus on the return only. This may well be the consequence of the anthropological focus as found elaborated in Augustine, especially when we compare him with the more undiluted cosmological perspective of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae* (c. 524) or the great moral laments found in the *Moralia in Job* by Pope Gregory the Great (fl. 590–604) (McGinn 1994: 34–79). Among the most powerful resonances of this anthropological Augustinian mysticism is Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* (c. 1078). As in Augustine's *Soliloquies*, what there unfolds as a search for knowledge – i.e. a rational proof of God – is in fact the mirror image of the soul's yearning for union with God. This yearning is both sustained and fulfilled in Anselm's methodological push not to employ a chain of arguments but *unum argumentum* (one single argument) (Gersh 1988). While masking as a rational phrase, embedded in an address to God but with the unpacking force of a Boethian syllogism, Anselm's near-tautological appeal to God in *Proslogion* 2 that "we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought (*et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*)" may be the closest analogue Christian mysticism has to offer to a Buddhist mantra, to the extent that with each repetition this single argument does not just notionally confirm the existence of God but brings God's redeeming presence within the purview of the fallen soul.

In contrast to the Benedictine Anselm (c. 1033–1109), the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153) (see Chapter 16, this volume) continued in his masterful *Song of Songs commentary* the bridal mysticism of Origen, mediated through Gregory the Great. An astute allegorical exegete and a master of the human psyche, Bernard adhered *qua* form to the mystical quest of the monastic soul for God. Yet there is an element of display and personal distance in his texts, which both mediate and delay the intimate encounter with the divine, as if aimed at heightening suspense rather than effecting return. His is a mysticism of the monastic shock waves, as when in his *Third Sermon on the Nativity* he sees the Abbreviated Word from one moment to the next first in the child in the manger and then hanging on the cross (trans. in Pranger 240–244), or when in sermon on the Song 2.2.3 he equates the incarnation with the lover who

kisses with the kiss of the mouth in Song of Songs 1:1. Despite drawing on the so-called *liber experientiae* (Book of experience) (Sermon on the Song 3.1), Bernard's mysticism is as literarily virtuoso as any in the Middle Ages – but, due to the suspenseful rhetoric of his Song exegesis and its delayed mystical vision, less Platonic than either Anselm's or Augustine's.

We encountered in Anselm and Bernard two famous medieval mystical theologians representing the monastic sphere, which dominated the cultural and intellectual outlook of the Middle Ages from the eighth through the twelfth century (see Chapter 15, this volume). While the identity of Christian thought and Platonic thought continued in the monastic era of the early Middle Ages, monastic mysticism stands out by being shaped at once by its enclosure of physical space and its heavy reliance on memory. This created great freedom for the human soul which, with the aid of biblical tools and liturgical reminiscences, could map out its own way to God. Whereas Bernard's was a more psychological mysticism, echoed by other Cistercians like Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), because of the heightened social isolation of Cistercian monasteries, it was also freer in its linguistic experiments. This is clear, for example, when Bernard emphasized the abbot's role as mother (Bynum 154–159) or argued that in the life of faith you can touch Christ's deep and mystical breasts (sermon on the Song 28), all creative variations on the monk's traditional role as bride of Christ, in which he is confirmed yet can never be entirely comfortable. As the Middle Ages continued, the experimental quality of Christian mysticism became increasingly foregrounded, not dissimulating its Platonic roots but, as will appear in our final example from Marguerite Porete, pushing them in unanticipated directions.

This experimental freedom of medieval mysticism, which only increased when it became separated from the more institutionally conceived theological tradition, was ultimately rooted in a strong anthropological self-awareness of the mystical author. Medieval mystics displayed indeed a remarkable trust in the ability of the human mind to sketch out a trustworthy route back to God, assuming what appears to be a kind of *a priori* affinity between (especially the higher parts of) the human soul and God. Traditional scholarship has noted a second doctrinal difference between Platonism and Christian mysticism precisely on this point. It has been argued that, while for Platonism the major cosmic dividing line lies between the intelligible and the sensible world, for Christianity it lies between God as the creator *ex nihilo*, and the world of sensible and intelligible creatures. Thus in Platonism humans are souls lost in a material world where they do not really belong; as their real affinity is with the spiritual world of the divine, the return is but an extension of their natural desire. In Christian mysticism, by contrast, humans are fallen creatures who naturally belong in and with the spatio-temporal world. And while the material world itself is not residually evil, our knowledge of it has greatly suffered the effects of Adam's fall.

As with the difference between emanation and creation, however, I see this as a somewhat artificial difference to the extent that in Christian mysticism, especially of a Platonic bend, human nature is ranked consistently close to God, endowed as it is with the dignity of being *imago dei* (Genesis 1:26–27). Humanity's status as divine image puts it on the cusp of the material and the spiritual realm, with Christian mystics seeing great advantage to its mixed status. After all, in this view humans can oversee

both spheres, which the angels, while themselves enjoying higher spiritual status but not created in the divine image, are incapable of doing. Hence humanity's creaturely status does not seem to have negatively impacted its potential to transcend creaturely limits and, inspired by divine grace, move as closely as possible to the divine. For Christian mystics the return to God is very often framed as a homecoming, a pilgrimage to the fatherland. This explains why they see ordinary, fallen life in Platonic fashion as a place from which to flee, in terms used by both Augustine and Bernard: a *regio dissimilitudinis* (region of unlikeness, cf. *Conf.* 7.10.16; Bernard, *De gratia et libero arbitrio* 10.32).

Mysticism and Platonism in Eriugena and Bonaventure

The Carolingian Irishman Johannes Scottus Eriugena (810–877) and the Franciscan master general Bonaventure (1221–1274) are both medieval Christian-Platonic mystics who uniquely combined the western-Platonic influence of Augustine, which we already discussed, with the eastern Platonizing influence of Dionysius the Areopagite, whose use of negative theology and coinage of the concept of hierarchy stand out. Situated as they are in rather different ages, Eriugena and Bonaventure present us with a cross-section of medieval mysticism. In what follows I will briefly discuss both authors individually before engaging in comparison. I will conclude with comments on Christology as a central component in their mysticism, and one on which – more than on the questions of creation versus emanation or the dignity of human nature – certain allowances had to be made to make the Platonic tradition fit Christian mystical purposes.

The Periphyseon *of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*

Eriugena's *Periphyseon* ("On Natures") is not generally seen as part of the medieval mystical canon. This is in part because Eriugena's career and life are little known, but even more because the work is considered impenetrable. With the critical edition of his oeuvre now complete, however, it is imperative to integrate Eriugena with the broader spectrum of medieval Christian-Platonic mysticism. The *Periphyseon* contains five books divided across four natures: *natura creans et non creata* (God), *natura creans et creata* (the primordial causes), *natura non creans et creata* (spatio-temporal reality) and *natura non creans et non creata* (God). From the fact that God occupies the first and the last position, it is clear that these four forms manifest a temporal unfolding, a story of procession (with nature emanating from God as first cause in Books 1–3) and return (with nature returning to God as final cause in Books 4–5).

I am inclined to see the work neither as a pantheist nor as a monist system, even though I am conscious of Eriugena's apodictic declaration that "causes are made in their effects" (*Periph.* 2.528B), by which God effectively comes into being and gets to know Godself through his engagement in *creatio continua*. And despite Eriugena's comment that the existence of beings in the divine mind supersedes their actual material being, culminating in the statement that the human mind is a notion conceived eternally in the divine

mind (*Periph.* 4.768B),[4] I do not for this reason see his thought as idealist. While the *Periphyseon*'s features are best seen as creative moves within a shared Platonic matrix to which the term dialectical mysticism best applies (McGinn 1994: 80–118), in the final analysis it is Eriugena's idiosyncratic synthesis that defines the work's originality.

Unique to this synthesis, in which Augustine and Dionysius never contradict each other, and in line with the crucial importance of human nature, is its unfolding along an anthropological axis. Prior to presenting his four natures, Eriugena divided reality into being and nonbeing, assigning being to things that can be understood and nonbeing to things that transcend the human sense and understanding, while calling the whole by the name of *natura*. From the *Periphyseon*'s inception, therefore, human nature fulfills a creative role not unlike the divine itself, as nature as a construct only comes into being when Eriugena, who quite self-consciously acts as the exponent of human nature throughout the work's dialogue, engages in its division. Also, while human nature resides in the realm of spatio-temporal creation as a part of *natura non creans et creata*, Eriugena singles it out again at the opening of Book 4, when in un-Augustinian fashion we find the beginning of the return coinciding with the creation, rather than the fall, of humanity. In an interesting twist, however, Eriugena often illustrates this affinity with an Augustinian comment from *De vera religione* 55.113 about the lack of distance between our mind's understanding of God and the truth through which we understand him.[5]

Dionysius comes in on Eriugena's journey from procession to return in two ways. In Book 1, Eriugena expounds and flirts with the interplay of affirmative and negative theology. His interpretation is aided by his translation of the Dionysian corpus, which Eriugena translated into Latin, thus introducing Dionysius into the medieval west. Yet despite Eriugena's fascination with Dionysius' hyper-predications, and his effective display of negative theology to dismiss the applicability of all the Aristotelian categories to God, even that of being, he does not pursue this line of questioning, returning to negative theology once more in a masterful digression on God as *nihil* in Book 3 (Sells 34–62). He continues the dialectic of procession and return by taking up the concept of theophany, which is influenced by Maximus Confessor's idea that the condescension of the divine wisdom can be matched through grace by the exaltation of the creature in *theosis* (*Periph.* 1.449A–B). Theophany also has a moral overtone for Eriugena. Just as God wanted to reveal God to us in creation, and wants the good souls to return to Godself, so the evil ones will be punished at the end of time by viewing empty theophanies, with which Eriugena replaces physical hell. In a special return, the blessed will enjoy individualized theophanies of near union with the divine.

Despite the obvious spiritualizing tendencies that pervade Eriugena's synthesis, it is ultimately grounded in his firm conviction of incarnation, which prevents it from being either statically monist or cyclically pantheist, and preserves its scriptural embeddedness. As he describes in his *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of John*, which was wrongly attributed to Origen, and for that reason circulated especially among the allegorically-minded Cistercians, John's eagle soars to great heights only to dive down in John 1:6: "There was a man, sent by God, whose name was John" (*Hom.* 14, trans. in O'Meara 168). Of the four Timaean elements of aether, air, water and earth mentioned here, lowly earth is where John's eagle descends, thus preparing the way for Christ's

incarnation. With another term from Maximus, Eriugena calls the incarnation a thick-ening (*incrassatio*), and in a unique reading of the parable of the prodigal son, goes so far as to compare "the man Christ" to the fatted calf that will be sacrificed upon the feast at his return (*Periph.* 5.1005B). With this holocaust, the stage is set for humanity's *transitus*, a staged contemplative return to God.[6] Despite the spiritual vision that Eriu-gena's concept of nature presents when unpacked, it has a solid concreteness about it. This concreteness is further underscored by the way in which the dialectical journey of procession and return in Books 3–5 is framed as a *Hexaemeron*, an exposition of creation in Genesis.

What remains among the most remarkable aspects of Eriugena's synthesis, besides the notion of *transitus* which we also encounter in Bonaventure, is how the entire work kicks off as a drawn-out moment of human reflection: *saepe mihi cogitanti* (*Periph.* 1.441A: often when I ponder). He thereby endows the labored *Periphyseon* from the start with the daring sense that its cosmic mysticism may disappear where it came from: into the mystical folds of condensed reflection, as his own majestic theophany (Otten 470–472).

The Itinerarium mentis in Deum *of Bonaventure*

Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* has various aspects in common with this view of the *Peri-physeon*, but is much more patterned on return, as the process that we find outlined in it is explicitly framed as an interiorized hierarchy (Turner 102–134) towards mystical union. Yet we should not underestimate the degree to which this spiritualized view is still meant to describe the unfolding of actual creation as well, even if in a more sche-matized and interiorized form. As we know from the *Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, Bonaventure had a strong programmatic interest in the organization of knowledge, driven as he was by the desire to unify knowledge by subsuming all its branches under the aegis of theology. Insofar as he thereby wanted to oppose the scholastic instrumen-talization of knowledge, he is keen to integrate in Augustinian-Anselmian fashion, mediated further by Richard of St. Victor's (see Chapter 17, this volume) method in *On the Trinity*, the acquisition of knowledge with actual progress on the spiritual path. In this way Bonaventure, like the Victorines before him, was interested in continuing a mystic-monastic trajectory outside the monastic sphere.

The above paradigm communicates to us that a strong Augustinianism character-izes Bonaventure's mystical framework. We find this Augustinianism in the difference he assumes between use and enjoyment, for example, which helps to energize the spir-itual ascent, but also in his awareness of the double effect of humanity's fallenness, as intellectual ignorance and moral concupiscence are strongly intertwined for him. At the same time there is considerable Dionysian influence as well, of the kind that will become very prominent in Eckhart and other late medieval mystics, namely an adher-ence to the triadic sequence of purgation, illumination, and perfection, manifest espe-cially in his *De triplici via*. One may say that this triad, which seems absent from Eriugena's fascination with the divine names, unfolds on every stage of the *Itinerarium*'s ascent, seven stages in all, while the ascent as a whole also covers these three stages.

The treatise begins with a Trinitarian appeal by Bonaventure to find the peace of Christ as mediated through Francis, to whom thirty-three years after his death he is the seventh successor. It starts properly with his vision of a six-winged seraph in the form of the Crucified, which Francis had also had, and which Bonaventure therefore immediately recognizes as a fitting model of contemplation. Following the model of ascent known from Augustine's *Confessions* – *exterior*, *interior*, *superior* – we can trace every two Bonaventurean steps as representing one stage. In Chapter 1, God is contemplated *through* God's vestiges in the natural world, while in Chapter 2 God is contemplated *in* those same vestiges, which together complete the contemplation of the outside world. In Chapter 3, God is considered in God's image as it is imprinted on our natural powers, while in Chapter 4 God is considered in God's image as reformed by grace, which completes the contemplation of the inner life of the soul. Ascending to the Godhead next, Bonaventure first engages in a consideration of the divine unity under the name of Being, while contemplating God next as Trinity under the name of the Good. Bonaventure picks up here on Dionysius in two ways. First, departing from Thomas Aquinas and other scholastics, he prefers goodness to being as divine attribute, while in making this choice, secondly, he harks back to the Latinized Dionysian principle of God as self-effusive goodness (*bonum diffusivum sui* in 6.2, cf. *On the Divine Names* 4.1). Since it is inherent in goodness to spread itself, so God communicates and shares Godself through creation.

The culmination of Bonaventure's ladder of ascent is a unique seventh step. It marks a final and climactic *transitus*, which takes one beyond the mirrors (*specula*) whereby the visionary mystic traveled until now, and even beyond the self until one reaches a state of *excessus mentis*, which is mindful both of Richard of St. Victor and of Dionysian ecstasy. This final step is thoroughly Christological, with Christ being both the means and the end of the *transitus*, i.e., the way and the door, the ladder and the vehicle, the mercy seat above the ark and the hidden mystery (7.1). But there is a twist to the *transitus* here in comparison with Eriugena. In the Bonaventurean *transitus*, which performs an actual transformation, one sees Christ hanging on the cross, as *transitus* is here directly connected to the biblical story of passion and resurrection. While *transitus* is a Latin translation of the Hebrew term for Passover, in connection with the paschal vigil the term had since early Christianity also been brought into connection with the Greek *paschein* (to suffer, Lat. *pati*) and hence with Christ's passion (Mohrmann), to which Augustine also spoke in *Conf.* 7.21.27. The tradition of double passion that Bonaventure affirms here – i.e. that of the mystic's affection as lit up by Christ's suffering – will feed into later mystical traditions of the night of the soul, marking the development of a new Christian kenotic spirituality reminiscent of Neoplatonic *apophasis*. Pledging loyalty to his order, Bonaventure affirms that his is indeed the mystical contemplation that Francis had also had. While he integrates it with the Christian-Platonic tradition by citing a long quotation from Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* 1.1 about leaving the senses and contemplation behind to arrive at the unity above all, the mystic's transport here is different from preceding uses of this Dionysian text to the extent that Christ's passion is now driving it.

In a magnificent final section (7.6), Bonaventure takes passion in a third direction, for besides affectivity and suffering passion it also points to consuming fire. God's

furnace is in Jerusalem (Isaiah 31:9) and Christ kindles it in the fire of his passion. Taking his cue from Dionysius again, Bonaventure leads us into the darkness of death, as together with Christ crucified he wants to pass out of this world (*transeamus*) to the Father.

Platonism in Medieval Mysticism: Questions, Conclusions, and a Comment about Gender

Let us end with a short evaluation following a pattern that is the reverse of how we started, namely not by stating what Platonism contributed to medieval mysticism but rather by what we learn more if we interpret medieval mysticism with an awareness of its Platonic background. Doing such a reverse analysis may help to instill in readers a sensitivity for what I have tried to phrase periodically throughout this article, namely that until the thirteenth century mysticism was not a separate category but an extension and intensification of medieval intellectual thought. This is true for the period from Augustine to Anselm and probably even to Bonaventure, although his lifetime saw the rise of a culture of independent, more compartmentalized rational thought. Until Bonaventure medieval thought can be generally called Platonic, which even applies to such incipient logicians as Peter Abelard (1079–1142).

The above affects our reading of these medieval-mystical texts in two ways. First, medieval thought is – in consonance with the double statement in Augustine's *Soliloquies* – not just about acquiring knowledge about God and the soul, but it is at the same time driven by the idea that upon acquiring such knowledge the soul will be united with God. To this extent all medieval thought, which takes it cue from early Christian Platonic thought here, clearly has a mystical component to it, insofar as the goal of union with the divine permeates the sort of knowledge that is pursued. Thus we find an emphasis on monastic exegesis, which was deeply embedded in the medieval arts of the *trivium*, including grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, and geared towards unitive purposes. While in the Augustinian tradition the moment of actual union is seen as taking place after death, in his vision at Ostia but also in Anselm's argument there seem to be foretastes possible. Since these are framed within a larger ongoing dialogue with God, however, they are always more exemplary than personal, as they neither require nor rely on recourse to any special gifted experience or authority.

Secondly, medieval thought, but medieval mysticism in particular, tends to unfold by drawing concentric circles around an anthropological core, expanding from the human being seen in the image of God to the very outskirts of the cosmos. But it is the excitement of intersecting these circles of macro- and microcosm that makes medieval Platonic mysticism so exciting. It is this second dimension that after Bonaventure seems to become lost, as a more devotional but not thereby more experiential emphasis leads to a focus on negative theology as evidenced in the late fourteenth century anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (Turner 186–210). But the macro-microcosmic dialectic reemerges in the Renaissance Platonism of Pico della Mirandola's *On the Dignity of Man* (1486), which to that extent can be considered heir to the medieval Christian-Platonic tradition.

I have pointed out the important Christological aspect of medieval mysticism in Eriugena, where in Maximian vein it is linked to procession and incarnation, and in Bonaventure, where it is more linked to the return and Christ's passion. I have also pointed out the future of passion mysticism in the notion of the dark night of the soul. What remains to be discussed is the fate of Platonic Christological mysticism in certain late medieval women authors.

The status of late medieval women's mysticism is at this point of scholarly development not entirely clear: does it oppose scholasticism by being written in the vernacular, does it continue the monastic tradition outside the walls of the cloisters, are its visions designed to have an empowering quality and what role does gender play in the visionary process? Also, to what extent is women's authorship linked to mystical authority? While these and other questions take us outside the scope of the present article, I would like to close with a comment on Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of the Simple Souls* (see Chapters 6 and 22, this volume). Burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic in 1310, the thought of this beguine betrays certain similarities with Eckhart, but, from a medieval Platonic perspective, what is especially interesting is the way in which she, as a woman and in continuation, it seems, with the affective tradition of both Augustine and Bonaventure, implicitly contested the scholastic monopoly on reason, while – not unlike Eriugena – she maintained in total control of her own independently intellectual and visionary program of fluid hierarchies and interconnections. In a spirit of radicalized Dionysian apophaticism, however, this led her to take leave of the virtues (ch. 6) and proclaim even the death of Reason as friend (ch. 87), as Reason's task is now taken over by Love. Marguerite's journey, which leaned on the earlier beguine tradition of Hadewijch and Mechtild of Magdeburg and gestured to the tradition of courtly love, culminated in a kind of union that is at the same time the opposite of union, namely the annihilation of the soul (ch. 81; ch. 92). As Michael Sells has argued, the annihilation of soul is deeply Platonic in that it is a return to a precreative state of being, a reversion to what soul was when she was not, a sacrifice of its quoy (*quidditas*) in return for ecstatic freedom (131–134). The result of "living without means" (*intermedium*) and "without a why" is thoroughly innovative and, what's more, entirely her own. To the extent that, for Marguerite, mystical union contracts to the union-in-act of radical desire, her mystic nihilism (Dronke 209) may be seen both as a product and as the eclipse of medieval Platonic mysticism.

Notes

1 See *Conf.* 7.19.25: "For my part I admit it was some time later that I learnt, in relation to the words 'The Word was made flesh,' how Catholic truth is to be distinguished from the false opinion of Plotinus."

2 The *Soliloquies* are a dialogue between Reason and Augustine. In *Solil.* I.2.7 Reason famously asks Augustine: "What then do you want to know?" Augustine answers that he wants to know God and the soul and nothing more.

3 Not unlike Origen but without the focus on allegory, Augustine also strove for intimacy with God. Thus in *Solil.* II.1.1 we find a more personal outcry, as Augustine exclaims: *Deus*

semper idem, noverim me, noverim te! ("Oh God who is always the same, may I come to know me and come to know you!").

4 *Periph.* 4.768B: *Possumus ergo hominem definire sic: Homo est notio quaedam intellectualis in mente divina aeternaliter facta.*

5 *De vera religione* 55.113: *Inter mentem nostram qua ipsum intelligimus patrem et ueritatem per quam ipsum intelligimus nulla interposita creatura est* ("Between our mind with which we understand the father and the truth through which we understand him no creature is interposed"). This is a favorite quote of Eriugena's, see e.g. *Periph.* 2.531B and 4.759B–C.

6 See the prayer in *Periph.* 5.1010C: "And what is the path (*transitus*) along which Thou leadest them, O Lord, but an ascent through the innumerable steps of Thy contemplation (*per infinitos contemplationis tuae gradus ascensus*)? And ever dost Thou open that way (*te transitum facis*) in the understandings of those who seek to find Thee. Ever art Thou sought by them and ever art Thou found – and yet ever art Thou not found: Thou art found in Thy theophanies (*inveniris quidem in tuis theophaniis*)."

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CHAPTER 5

Aesthetics

Don E. Saliers

Christian theology in the patristic and medieval eras exhibits a continual concern with beauty and the desire for God. In this respect aesthetic matters were ingredient in nearly all theological reflection. Images of light and glory pervade the writings, and the sense of "seeing" provides a root metaphor for human knowledge of God. The "vision of God" – the promise of which is given in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:8) and in Paul (1 Corinthians 13:12) – becomes central to the subsequent traditions of mystical theology. While metaphors of seeing and vision are primary in the apprehension of God, and basic to developments in religious epistemology, all human senses also appear in theological and mystical writings. This whole range is inherent in conceiving the "spiritual senses" found in nearly all mystical theologians.

At the heart of Christian faith and thought stands the claim of divine self-revelation in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ who reveals the invisible, transcendent beauty of God. The theme of Christ as the *eikon* or image of God, found in Colossians and Hebrews and elsewhere in the New Testament (see Chapter 7, this volume), is crucial to Christian theological aesthetics, especially for developments under the influence of Platonic and Neoplatonist forms of thought. The twin themes of the "beauty of Christ" and "Christ, the image of God" permeate most mystical theologians, early and late. Bonaventure (1217–1274), for example, speaks of the extraordinary beauty of Jesus: "This most beautiful flower of the root of Jesse (Isaiah 11.1), which had blossomed in the incarnation and withered in the passion, thus blossomed again in the resurrection so as to become the beauty of all" (60). Determining the relationships between the sensual and the spiritual – between embodied experience and profound transcendence – marks the theological aesthetic of these same theologians.

Such interplay between the sensory and the spiritual was already present in Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament. The language of visible and invisible reality characteristic of sacred scriptures stimulated aesthetic features found in much Christian mystical theology. In contemplation and prayer, the cultivation of religious desire takes into its practices the rich poetics of the Bible – especially the poetics of creation, theophany and resurrection. For example, the transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:1–6; Luke 9:28–36; Mark 9:2–8), the visible manifestation of divine glory, came to play a dominant role, especially among Orthodox theologians.

To the poetics of scriptural language mystical theologians brought the intellectual resources of Greek philosophy. In Plato and the ensuing Neoplatonic traditions, contrasts between the visible world and the invisible were made into principles of thought. Ideas of unity, perfection, truth, goodness and beauty were ways of ordering belief as well as ways of making sense of human experience of God. These notions were interrelated as part of what we could call the *aesthetics of the cosmos*. They became the so-called "transcendentals" of later scholastic theologies. The whole of the created order was made conceivable under aesthetic categories, and God was pictured as the great architect and artist. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), described God as artisan. Speaking of the created universe, he wrote: "through these visible things and their magnitude, beauty, and order we are led to marvel at the divine art and excellence . . . In the creation of the world God made use of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, which we also use when we investigate the proportions of things" (166).

In bringing together scripture and the ontological/aesthetic concerns of Greek philosophical thought, the early traditions of mystical theology heightened and enriched the tensions between transcendence and the sensorial world. The practices of scripture reading, meditation, and liturgical prayer were themselves "tensive." For how could human language and practices say and show the unsayable? How could the visible be made to say and show the invisible? The unfathomable reality of God remained the object of religious desire beyond all human language. In the theologians of mystical sensibility – often building on one another's practices – the limits of language meet the intense desire to "see God" and to attain participatory knowledge of the mystery of the divine life. In this way metaphors, symbols and images born of sense perception remained essential to the rhetorical strategies of Christian discourse attempting to speak the ineffability of God. When love and desire are to be expressed, forms of speech and consciousness move the emotions through imaginative means. "Affective knowing" and wonderment mark the aesthetic domain of poetry, music and gesture – and of mystical theology. The world is seen and heard "as" something more than what is seen and heard.

This essay traces major aesthetic features of the writings of a select range of mystical theologians. Special accent falls on the role of poetic language, affective perception (*aisthesis*) and the way in which the sensuous is crucial to human *eros* for God. How is the spiritual ingredient in the sensible, and how is the sensible crucial to spiritual desire? These questions may illuminate how eschatological and doxological elements are both recurrent features of the aesthetics of mystical theology. Gesa Theissen remarks, "praise is palpable especially in the church fathers and in the mystics when they write in systematic-conceptual terms on God and then suddenly burst into poetic words and song, addressing God directly" (6).

The Senses of Aesthetic

"Aesthetics" is a multifaceted concept. This term commonly refers to the study of art and reflection on matters of beauty. Used in this manner, "aesthetics" is often synonymous with "philosophy of art" as a field of critical inquiry. We ask questions about things we call beautiful, whether in nature or in the arts of human making (*poeisis*), and our answers, if consistently developed, take the form of aesthetic theory. Thomas Aquinas observed, for instance, "we call a thing beautiful when it pleases the eye of the beholder"; "beauty is a matter of right proportion, for senses delight in rightly proportioned things" (*ST*; 1A, question 5). Classical/scholastic theology thus developed a set of analogies between the beauty of material things and the beauty of spiritual reality. Contemporary aesthetics, in contrast, tends to diminish the role of beauty as a central category, often contesting the idea of beauty as being central to our understanding of art and the world. For many academics beauty seems to belong to past intellectual fashions. However, for Christian theology – particularly among the mystics – the concepts of beauty and the attraction to what is beautiful have remained crucial.

"Aesthetics" can also refer to the phenomena of human pleasure in perceiving and experiencing beautiful things. The Greek term *aisthesis* concerns affective perception of the world in and through human senses. To delight or take pleasure in something outside the knowing subject is part of what it means to "know" a desirable or pleasurable object. The aesthetic domain may thus be conceived as *modes of experiential knowing the world that point beyond merely cognitive or discursive knowledge*. Poetry, music, the visual arts and bodily ritual actions are capable of sustaining an imaginative beholding of reality beyond what immediately appears to the senses. In this way, certain modes of aesthetic reflection link with various ideas of transcendence. Aesthetic reflection also focuses attention on the creative process and performance practices.

Interpreting mystical religious practices and experience through such aesthetic categories has a long history. This is central to understanding mystical theology. Yet this form of interpretation has also generated a history of controversy and conflict among theological and spiritual traditions. Take idolatry as an example. The iconoclastic controversies in the early church were both aesthetic and theological disputes. Relationships between physical and spiritual beauty were more than speculative questions; they were theologically and religiously divisive. Disputes about icons arose in the eighth and ninth centuries when some theologians considered any representation of God as idolatrous. Their opponents argued that images were to be allowed on the basis of the incarnation of God in Christ. John of Damascus (c. 675–749) and Theodore of Studios (759–826) were major figures in the defense of images, leading to official approval at the Second Council of Nicea (787) and the Fourth Council of Constantinople (869–870). Similar controversies and destruction of images rose again in the Reformation period in figures such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) and the Puritan traditions. Tertullian's (c. 160–c. 220) earlier question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" has remained relevant. What do philosophical theories of beauty and aesthetics have to do with the revelation of God in a particular historically located person and context?

While all of these senses of "aesthetic" come into play when reading the mystics, two are most prominent: the role of metaphoric and analogical language in conceiving and addressing the divine, and the paradoxical patterns of sense experience in relation to God and spiritual practices. This is found especially in the concept and practice of "spiritual senses," a concept found in Origen and developed through the centuries by subsequent mystical theologians. Spiritual senses build on the original meaning of the Greek term *aisthesis* – affective perception and knowing in and through the senses. The language of both Scripture and of mystical experience reaches beyond ordinary means of expression to give voice to knowledge of God by virtue of the purified heart, mind, and body.

The attempt to express in language what mystics received in "inner experience" inevitably struggles with the problematic necessity of aesthetic dimensions of language and experience. Mystics do not always seek to communicate what is given to "mystical experience." Yet, when they do, they often use "language that tries to fuse feeling, and knowing – *amor ipse intellectus est*, as a well-known expression of medieval Latin Christian mysticism puts it" (McGinn 135).

Spiritual Senses and Spiritual Eroticism

While there are mystical tendencies in the interpretation of Scripture that precede him, Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (see Chapters 2 and 10, this volume) provided a third-century initiating point for reflection on the spiritual senses. For Origen the language of spiritual senses already permeates Scripture. In the *Psalms*, but especially in the *Song of Songs*, he found sensual images and erotic descriptions to be necessary in speaking of love between God, Christ and the soul. If the Bible is indeed the Logos or Word of God, then Christians are compelled to use such charged and image-laden speech to express relationships between the soul and the divine. The *Song of Songs* expresses and evokes the desire for God in the language of sensual activity – longing, kissing, embracing, touching and adoring. Such a desire for the divine life and love moves to knowledge beyond the physical; hence the cultivation of the spiritual senses flows from the deeply aesthetic reading of the texts. Origen had somehow to deconstruct the utter physicality of these actions depicted as human love. This deconstructive aspect of Origen's aesthetics created an oscillation between embrace and denial of the apparent erotic surfaces of the text. Origen showed both boldness and reticence toward themes and images drawn from the sensual language of sacred scripture to speak of intimacy with the divine life. He construed the erotic language of desire allegorically, continually expounding the "spiritual" meanings of central images.

Origen gives us a key concerning how he reads Scripture:

all the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to those that are hidden; so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, which from actual things and copies teaches us things unseen by means of those that are seen, and carries us over from earthly things to heavenly. (223)

For Origen, then, the mystery of the invisible is contained under sensible forms, hidden from a simple literal reading of the words of Scripture. More than "seeing" and sight are involved. His exegesis of the *Song* suggests that all the senses described in the mutuality between the lovers – touch, taste, the sound of the beloved's voice, and the beloved's movements – may be included in the spiritual senses. Thus he laid the groundwork for understanding the kinesthetic dimensions of seeking God as the beloved. Let us examine three examples of this development.

Gregory of Nyssa (see Chapter 11, this volume) also absorbed the *Song of Songs*, and he referred to the "perception of God" (*aesthesis thou*) as a major aim of spiritual practice. As Bernard McGinn observes, Gregory understood this as "a paradoxical state in which every enjoyment of God is also at one and the same time the kindling of a more intense and unfulfilled desire, and in which every knowing of God is also a grasping of [God's] transcendental unknowability" (136). Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation shows that poetic and symbolic expressions generate images that open believers to how God loves and perfects the human.

Gregory of Nyssa's approach to the *Song* was indebted to Origen but brought new theological and aesthetic insights out of the text. For him, the images of light and glory bring "darkness" to human intelligence at the highest level of mystical experience. The primary image of Christ as the bridegroom and the soul (or the church), so central to the writings of later mystics, is key to Gregory's exegesis of the *Songs*. The concealed Logos (Wisdom) in Christ is the source of his love and beauty. The created soul, though "fallen" through sin, has the capacity to be attracted by the divine love and beauty. Gregory employed a range of bodily images in speaking of the affect and effect of love of bridegroom and bride: the intoxication of love, the sense of disorientation, and self-giving desire. Yet he heightened the sense of "unknowing" – the accompaniment of the constant restlessness in the bride's (soul's) search for the beloved. Gregory has the bride say: "I have sought him by my soul's capacities of reflection and understanding; he completely transcended them, and escaped my mind when it drew near to him" (*Commentary* 220).

Gregory went beyond Origen in emphasizing that a passion for God is "passionless." Here the paradoxical language of the spiritual senses is given particular force. In a telling passage he admonishes the soul to "seethe with passion":

> Hence, the most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used as a symbol in the exposition of these teachings [i.e., in the *Song*]. It teaches us the need for the soul to reach out to the divine nature's invisible beauty and to love it as much as the body is inclined to love what is akin to itself. The soul must transform passion into passionlessness so that when every corporeal affection has been quenched, our mind may seethe with passion for the spirit alone. (*Commentary* 49)

This "holy eroticism" combined Gregory's "seething with passion" with an equal stress on the practice of the virtues. Seeing and tasting God for Gregory is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in a life of holiness and moral purity. Human perfection is possible, but only by cultivating "passionless" passion for God. In his writings on the Psalms and his ten homilies on the Beatitudes, Gregory conceived of the spiritual life as a ladder toward

perfection (*The Lord's Prayer* 85–175). Spiritual ascent to God requires a capacity for beauty and the ascetic practices of a holy life, both animated by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Origen and Gregory provided subsequent mystics with models and metaphors for discourses about the relation between divine and human love. Their approach to the *Song of Songs* – reflecting on divine beauty – influenced diverse figures such as Bonaventure (see Chapter 19, this volume), Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa (see Chapter 26, this volume). The *Song of Songs* became the most exegeted book of the Bible in monastic circles. Especially in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and William of St. Thierry (c. 1085–c. 1148) (see Chapter 16, this volume) we find highly poetic sermons, hymns and commentaries. Bernard expressed these themes forthrightly:

> When the Word . . . tells the soul, "You are beautiful," and calls it friend, he infuses into it the power to love, and to know it is loved in return. And when the soul addresses him as beloved and praises his beauty, she is filled with admiration for his goodness, attributing to him the grace by which she loves and is loved. The Bridegroom's beauty is his love for the bride, all the greater in that it existed before hers. (238)

Beauty and the *eros* of love commingle in Christ's desire for the soul, and in the soul's responsive desire for Christ. This is Bernard's profound "bridal mysticism."

Spiritual eroticism became full blown in Hadewijch of Antwerp (mid-thirteenth century). Directly influenced by Bernard, she differed in construing bridal love not in terms of covenant but as courtly love. It is the knight's relentless desire that characterizes the mystical love of God. For Hadewijch, unlike Bernard and others, love of God brings patterns of suffering, doubt and ambiguity as well as the promise of ecstasy. In tasting Christ's Eucharistic body and blood she writes: "After that he came Himself to me, took me entirely in His arms and pressed with the desire of my heart and my humanity and all my members felt his in full felicity" (281). Here the desire animating the spiritual senses fuses with the erotic.

Insofar as the *Song of Songs* provided a primary text for the mystics' writing, "holy eroticism" fed on and intensified the cultivation of spiritual senses. The forms of speech appropriate to these developments were intrinsically poetic. The very notion of mystery beyond language requires the stretching of language to the breaking point.

Poetic Discourse and the Mystery of God

The attempt to speak of God and the experience of contemplative prayer is, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, "a raid on the inarticulate" (128). Yet the language of desire and love of God opens the door to understanding what cannot even be recognized without intentional affective participation. Image, metaphor, and heightened speech are found in the vocative of address and in the attempt to describe contemplative or visionary experiences of the mystery of God. The difference between "outer experience" and "inner" (or mystical) experience shows striking evolution in such figures as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, Bernard and the women mystics of the later medieval tradition. What

begins as a clear distinction may later suggest that the carnal and the spiritual became increasingly fused. We can speak, then, of a changing "aesthetic" within mystical discourse over time. The mode of speaking the mystery of the incarnate God becomes more complex when we consider Bernard of Clairvaux's "carnal love of Christ" in the twelfth century and its later appearance in mystics such as Hadewijch and Julian of Norwich, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, respectively.

Many contemporaries might find it odd, if not counter-intuitive, to learn that mystics have much to teach us about aesthetic capacities. Certainly many would be shocked by the explicit eroticism involved in their interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. The popular image of a mystic is of someone who denies the body and flees from the senses into utter wordless transcendence. This appears to be found, for example in Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327) (see Chapter 23, this volume), Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) (see Chapter 22, this volume), or in the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* (see Chapter 24, this volume). Eckhart's form of mysticism negated all forms of interior experience and language. Yet even in these cases, as subsequently found also in John of the Cross (1542–1591) (see Chapter 28, this volume), aesthetic dimensions of contemplative practices and their anti-experiential languages still play a significant role. Those interested in mysticism, not having read primary sources in detail, may be overly impressed with dichotomies between mind and body, "inner" and "outer," the "spiritual" and the "physical," intimacy with God and human sensuality, and between other-worldliness and this-worldliness. Such contrasts, found throughout the literature, are heavily indebted to Platonic and Neoplatonist ways of thinking. Standard textbook accounts tend to turn these contrasts into simple metaphysical dichotomies. Such dichotomous views, I contend, can be both inadequate and mistaken as general characterizations of mystical theology. Tracing the history of mystical theology reveals these shifting conceptions of the aesthetics of spiritual practice and theological writing.

"For God surpasses all meaning and intelligence, and alone possesses immortality, whose light is called darkness by virtue of its excellence, since no creature can comprehend either what or how it is" (93). So wrote the ninth-century Irish Platonist philosopher-theologian, John Scotus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877) (see Chapter 4, this volume), in his unfinished *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. His reading of the phrase "and the light shines in the darkness" from the prologue to John's gospel clearly shows the imprint of Neoplatonist thought. Continual references to light and darkness dominate his discourse. Images of illumination of the mind and spiritual seeing run through his theological and spiritual writings – indeed, through most all mystical theology. But these images also flow from the rhetoric of Johannine Christianity. Scotus himself was to influence a remarkable range of figures in the history of mysticism: Eckhart, Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361), Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293/94–1381), Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168–1253), the German mystics, the kabalistic *Zohar* of Moses de Leon (c. 1250–1305), as well as later thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600).[1] Eriugena's reflections on the prologue to John's gospel serve as a touchstone to the paradoxical character of an aesthetic epistemology and cosmology. The sources of this paradoxical aesthetic epistemology are found in the poetics of Hebrews Scriptures and the Christian Testament. Biblical poetics consistently point to the veiled mystery of God's majesty and

inner being. There is asystematic reticence to assume that God is subject to any human image or category. God remains hidden even in being revealed. Mystery is co-natural to the language of Scripture and to the primary language of prayer that can never "contain" the being and power of God.

Much of the Bible, therefore, is "heightened speech" – that is, poetry, song, and image-permeated forms of discourse. As we have seen, the *Psalms* and the *Song of Songs*, in particular, played a formative role in the mystical traditions. Heightened speech is present in both narratives and in the prophetic and rabbinic forms of teaching, intensified in the New Testament teachings of Jesus. The Book of Revelation is filled with the aesthetics of vision (apocalypse) and hearing. Descriptive and ascriptive language about God is inherently metaphoric, poetic, analogical, and symbolic. Except for fundamentalist literalism and Enlightenment rationalism, nearly all theologians still recognize this claim about religious discourse. Formal scholastic theology prefers to think with a theory of analogy in its various forms, favoring conceptual stability and clarity in argumentation. The so-called "doctrine of analogy" was developed in part to maintain the difference between God and all that is creaturely – that is to preserve the "mystery" of the relation between God and the world. Whereas scholastic theology intends to explain and to guide the logic of discourse about God, monastic and mystical theologians are concerned to *enter* the divine mystery of love. These venerable and earlier traditions of theological thought stay in touch with biblical language and the desire for beauty and goodness in seeking intimacy with God.

In mystical traditions, however, such discourse is pushed to the edge of paradox. In seeking knowledge *of* God, not simply *knowledge about* God, mystical writers stress both the divine unknowability and poetic receptivity. Contemplative practices of prayer and reading generate complex and subtle articulations of sensory and sensual dimensions of awareness and language addressed to God. These aesthetic dimensions are *more* than linguistic. Hence the prominence of non-verbal embodied experience in the senses of touch, smell, hearing, sight, and embrace. The concept of "experience" we meet in many mystical writings is boldly "synaesthetic," often fusing more than one domain of sense with another. "O taste and see" is a clue from Psalm 34. Such synaesthetic elements are found especially in the texts most appealed to by mystical theologians (see below on approaches to the *Song of Songs*). In the twelfth century, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux comes to speak co-equally of the *liber experientiae* ("book of experience") and the book of Scriptures in expressing the inner connection between love of God and a non-presumptive approach to the mystery of the divine life. To read and understand mystical writers requires the intimate relationship between poetry, poetics, and the unfathomable hiddenness of God. The poetics are strikingly present in the voice and sound of adoration and praise, to which we now turn.

Embodied Acoustical Ecstasy and Praise

A century after Origen, Augustine of Hippo (see Chapters 13 and 14, this volume), in an often-cited passage from his *Confessions*, speaks to God of love in highly charged language:

> But what is it that I love in loving thee? Not physical beauty, nor the splendor of time, nor the radiance of the light . . . nor the sweet melodies of the various kinds of songs, nor the fragrant smell of flowers and ointments and spices; not manna and honey, not the limbs embraced in physical love – it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet . . . I love a certain kind of light and sound and fragrance and food and embrace in loving my God, who is the light and sound and fragrance and food and embracement of my inner [self] . . . This is what I love when I love my God. (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, 6:8, 205–206)

Added to the feature of linguistic paradox highlighted in the earlier citation from Nicolas of Cusa, Augustine's observation marks a great ambivalence. This runs as a thread through the history of religious aesthetics, and especially so in the mystical traditions that follow. His "and yet" signals precisely the problematic status of the "aesthetic" in the practices indigenous to the mystical traditions of theology.

What role does the aesthetic of sacred acoustics play both in language about God, but especially in the texture and ethos in mystical patterns of experience when God is addressed? Augustine was drawn toward the beautiful and the good, rooted in a view of reason as *eros*. At the same time he was steeped in the concrete imagery and sensory rhetoric of the psalms and Christian Scriptures. In this passage he calls to mind the sensible stuff of liturgical participation – especially known in the rites of Christian initiation in Ambrose's Milan – as the appropriate analogical discourse of the soul. To say what loving God is "like" sheds light on why mystical (and liturgical) traditions make appeal to the significance of the human senses, while at the same time maintaining the paradoxical "not like" we hear in apophatic theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius and John Scotus writing in the mystical/contemplative traditions. One thinks of Augustine's ambivalence concerning the melody of the psalms in Ambrose's Milan. He weeps with joy at the "delights of the ear" in praying the psalms. Yet at times he wishes to banish those melodies because their sensual sound seemed to clutter and obscure the pure hearing and reading of God's word. The aesthetics of the spiritual senses involves a form of tensive (deconstructive) interpretation of the physical senses.

A recurrent feature in mystical theology is the shift from reticence on the edge of silence to the exuberant poetry of direct address to God. Prose or propositional accounts of the divine cannot express intense desire and love of God; such love must find its expression in the music of songs of praise. In this way the language of ecstatic response counterpoints the ineffability of God. The vocative of loving address exceeds the indicative of claim and description of the sensibly "hearable." In this way the pulse and rhythm of speech itself is a key aesthetic factor in mystical bursts of doxology.

Augustine's *Commentary* and *Sermons on the Psalms* witness to this in several ways. One of the most remarkable passages occurs in his discussion of "singing with jubilation" while commenting on Psalm 32, verse 8. Workers at harvest or in the vineyard sing during their work. Their happiness may begin with familiar songs, but when joy overtakes them, they move to "jubilation" (*jubilum*) or wordless singing. Augustine observes:

> The *jubilus* is a melody which conveys that the heart is in travail over something it cannot bring forth in words. And to whom does that jubilation rightly ascend, if not to God the

ineffable? . . . and if you cannot tell Him forth in speech, yet ought not to remain silent, what else can you do but jubilate? . . . the heart rejoices without words and the boundless expanse of rapture is not circumscribed by syllables. (112)

We might speak of this as embodied acoustical ecstasy. Music that moves beyond the words into sheer praise of God exhibits another side of the aesthetic of mysticism. Joy in God in this case involves the fullness of physical senses and the total self-giving of the soul in doxology.

Time and again in the history of mystical writers doxological poetry becomes a primary idiom. Early on, Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373) used paradoxical language to sing Christ. He pictured the Gospel itself as a great mirror: "Although it is silent, it speaks./Although it is mute, it cries out./Although it is reckoned as dead, it makes proclamation./Although it is still, it dances./Although it has no belly, its womb is of great expanse" (339).

A striking instance of a poetic doxology (short hymn of praise to God) expressing Christ's transfigured glory in relation to the motif of divinization is found in Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022). In *Hymns of Divine Love*, Symeon staged a dialogue in which Christ himself speaks:

> It is only a ray of glory/and a streak of My light/that they contemplate and by which they are divinized. For it is like a mirror/which receives. The rays of the sun/or a crystal stone/ which radiates brilliantly in mid-day. . . . And in wonderment and fear, they celebrate Me in song. (192)

For Symeon, the incarnation was written and experienced as light, and consequently the transfiguration/resurrection events provided images of the intensification of divine light to human perception. From such wonderment hymns, prayers, and theological poetics poured forth. Such acoustical forms of expression emerge with surprising regularity among mystical writers.

We find in Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the *Song of Songs* a later example. Bernard produced perhaps the most well known of the medieval allegorical interpretations of that text. It is actually a passionate, ecstatic doxology. The intimacy between Christ and the human soul depends on Christ's beauty and desirability. "Winged words honey-sweet fly to and fro between them, and their eyes like heralds of holy love, betray to each other their fullness of delight" (236). This creates the soul's double beauty. The twelfth-century musician and writer, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), concluded her account and commentary of her prophetic visions and auditions in *Scivias* with an ecstatic symphony. Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) provides perhaps the most well-known example of ecstatic praise in his "The Praises of God" and "The Canticle of the Creatures":

> Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,/Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honour, and all blessing./To You alone, Most High, do they belong,/and no human is worthy to mention Your name. Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures . . . Brother Sun . . . Sister Moon. (St. Francis of Assisi 113–114)

The Franciscan aesthetic/mystical tradition continues with Bonaventure. In his writings about beauty and pleasure he speaks of how all creatures are "vestiges in which we can see our God" (73). But, as in the vision of John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation, we "hear" the cosmic voice of praise: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing" (Revelation 5:13). In the midst of his treatise "The Tree of Life" Bonaventure is awestruck into sheer praise concerning Christ who is more beautiful than the sun: "Happy the eyes that have seen! But you will be truly happy if there will be remnants of your seed to see both interiorly and exteriorly that most desired splendour" (160–161). This is the sound of joyful awe.

A contemporary comment on the constant tensions in such embodied aesthetics seems apt. Commenting on mystical states of being and the senses Albert Rouet observes,

> if the Church has been and remains suspicious of the body, this is because the body offers the prime temptation toward self-absorption and becomes the principal means for captivating others. The real danger shows, however, that the occasion for the risk is equally an occasion for transfiguration. Even when the mouth is silent, the body has not yet said its last word. Then begins the dance, be it tragic or jubilant. (148–149)

In the deep silence of mystical experience there is also the "voice" of the body dancing, though it be the soul that moves in love's ecstasy. Mechtild of Magdeburg (1212–1283) (see Chapter 20, this volume) sounds the names of God from the silence: "O burning Mountain, O chosen Sun,/O perfect Moon, O fathomless Well,/O Unattainable Height, O Clearness beyond measure,/O Wisdom without end, O Mercy without limit,/O Strength beyond resistance, O Crown beyond all majesty:/The humblest thing you created sings your praise." The study of acoustical ecstasy in mystical acclamations takes us to the threshold of an "apophatic aesthetic."

Apophatic Aesthetics: The Tensive Condition

Any discussion of aesthetics and mysticism must come to terms with Pseudo-Dionysius, especially his *The Divine Names* (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume). Dionysius's theological writing at the turn of the sixth century was and remains a source for subsequent works we now term "theological aesthetics": he is often cited not only by Aquinas and but also by more recent post-modern theologians. At the heart of his work is the "tensive" language of similarities in dissimilarities. In the very experiencing of God under the figures and tropes of human consciousness, the dissimilarity of God emerges. This leads to a distinctive "apophatic aesthetic" in mysticism.

Pseudo-Dionysius also contributes to theological aesthetics through his treatment of harmony and proportion. He thus directly inspired the gothic architectural program of Abbot Suger (1081–1151). His *Celestial Hierarchy* depicts the perfectly ordered unity of creation, while his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* depicts the aesthetics of liturgical order and performance. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) observes that Dionysius

brought Neoplatonic aesthetics to the service of the Christian faith: "the clear realized synthesis of truth and beauty, of theology and aesthetics" (148). For Pseudo-Dionysius the whole of creation and all its particulars come into existence through "the One, the Good and the Beautiful." Platonic and Neoplatonic ways of thinking saturate his form of theology, yet he strives toward a synthesis of Christian doctrine and Neoplatonic thought. The following passage exhibits the permanent tensive character mystical language about the Good and the Beautiful:

> the Good which is above all light is given the name "light of the mind," "beam and spring," "overflowing radiance." It crams with its light every mind which is above and beyond the world, or around it or within it. It renews all the powers of their minds. It steps beyond everything inasmuch as it is ordered beyond everything. It precedes everything inasmuch as it transcends everything . . . sacred writers lift up a hymn of praise to this Good. They call it beautiful, beauty, love, and beloved. (Pseudo-Dionysius 82)

Here one encounters three aspects of the "aesthetics of mysticism": first, the stress on the utter transcendence of the Source of all that is still called "the Good" and "the Beautiful;" second, the use of contested analogies in descriptions and ascriptions of the Source; and third, how the mind and the world are permeated and illumined and known in and through the categories of what is good and what is beautiful reflected in the dynamic Trinitarian life of God. The Good lures and attracts as beautiful things attract. This is a philosophical restating of the desirability of God found in the love imagery of the *Song of Songs*. At the same time, the utter transcendence of God stands as a check against presumptive claims to know God in and through human experience.

In his *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius employs spatial and kinetic images to signal the mystery of God's own creative being. Though beyond human direct experience, the root metaphors for God's activity are movement: "procession and return," downward and upward in the whole created order. These hint at the dynamism of how God imparts beauty and goodness to all created things. At the same time, these aesthetic analogies symbolize the salvific return of all reality back to the divine source. Here we see a crucial relationship between *kataphatic* (in accordance with images) and *apophatic* (the negation of all images) reflection on the language of spiritual senses.

The mystical writer explains how the language of Scripture itself works, echoing themes we found in Origen and Gregory as well as Augustine: "The language of Scripture works "firstly, by proceeding naturally through sacred images in which like represents like, while also using formations which are dissimilar and even entirely inadequate and ridiculous" (Pseudo-Dionysius 149). This creates a tensive character to speaking of God. The aesthetic must be finally an apophatic one, combining perceptible symbols available to the senses with the inadequacy of all symbols and analogies for God. These are taken seriously as "experienced" precisely in order to show dissimilarity to the divine. Even for those later mystical writers – such as Bonaventure, William of Thierry, and Bernard of Clairvaux – who would stress the kataphatic aspects of spiritual practice, the disanalogies in such heightened speech still helped to maintain the mystery of God's difference from all creaturely language and experience. And the boldness of the carnal rhetoric of later medieval women would still preserve the distinction between

the saving work of the Creator and the human capacities to receive God. The more embodied the expression of the vision and experience of communion with God becomes, the more likely a counter-point arises in the aesthetics of mystical theology. Thus a highly apophatic response in Meister Eckhart follows the rising emphasis of sensual experience of communion with Christ in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century figures. The increasing language of sensual and sensory access to God's mystery prompted an austere rhetoric of negation in Eckhart. "Whatever we seek in creatures, all that is night. Even the highest angel's light, exalted though it be, is but a shadow and is night" (Eckhart 155). He attacks the language of experience, rejecting discourse about the spiritual senses, yet retains notions of desiring the darkness of God's glory.

Thus the unspeakable divine mystery of love meets and engages human fragility and desire in all the non-verbal languages of the body and soul: sound, silence, sight, and the invisible, time and temporality, space and place, taste, touch, gesture and movement, and ritual symbolic acts. These embodied languages form and express the "affective intentionality" of human desire for God. Theologians influenced by the mystical traditions understand that only by aesthetic means can such a desire be shaped and sustained. The desire for God intensifies precisely as images and metaphors are found to be inadequate to the mystery. The "hunger and thirst" for God is thus figured and transfigured.

As Bernard of Clairvaux and others have observed, true knowledge of God comes from the practice of sanctity, not from the exercise of reason alone. Love and desire both invade and transcend human intelligibility in all utterances about God. A theology that has no heightened speech, or remains "unpoetical" will not be drawn to the themes and reflective power of the mystical traditions.

Themes and Trajectories

The long development of the idea of spiritual senses shows a remarkable complexity in any approach to the aesthetics of mystical theology. The key figures in the traditions of mystical theology and practice have contributed greatly to the more general topic of theological aesthetics. For all the emphasis on the unutterability of God and practices designed to transcend the body and sensuality, the accent is still on desire and love. Aesthetic experience always plays on the horizon of awareness of something more than the bodily senses can yield. Certain poets and musicians as well as visual artists show this, even apart from questions of God. The far reaches of a Mahler symphony, or Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* come to mind, or a simple folk song performed with transparency to the suffering it contains – these are musical examples. The ambiguous poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke also stands in a line of mystical consciousness. So the practices of attentiveness to music and poetry, to the phenomenology of moving tonal spheres and heightened speech shading off to music may be "secular" reminders of aspects of the language and contemplative practices in mystical theologians.

How much more, then, is present when heightened speech and the deep pathos of yearning for God intersect? If we are to seek God, it begins with attentiveness to the deepest reaches of what the senses provide – yet never the senses alone. Always a form

of intelligibility comes; simultaneously we come to understand that we do not comprehend the divine life. We learn from the mystical traditions that participation in that life draws affective sensibility and mind together. In the great twelfth-century mystical theologians, Barbara Newman reminds us, "The two master-themes of twelfth-century thought – the 'blessed rage for order' and the anatomy of love – meet in the . . . accord of wisdom and longing, authority and experience, ascetic denial and erotic delight" (205).

The aesthetic features traced in the figures discussed here are generated by the constant interplay of Scriptures, contemplative prayer, and the infinite desire. The aesthetic features of mysticism continually hover around ecstatic doxology and the unimaginable eschatological hope (the ultimate saving fulfillment of God's promises). The ambiguity of claims to have "seen," "heard," "tasted," or "touched" God directly shows the tensive character of all practices, both kataphatic and apophatic.

In the present age, theological reflection on mystical experiences of God can no longer readily invoke inherited modes of thought. Neoplatonic depictions of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True can no longer be assumed. Yet sacred scriptures continue to provoke and invite finding a language to frame the mystery of the spiritual in the sensible, and the sensible in the spiritual. In a time of intellectual presumption about what is real coupled with a profound sense of disillusion, appreciation for the traditions of theological aesthetics born of the mystical traditions may once again illuminate questions of God-seeking. Presumptive theological claims and biblical fundamentalisms need once again the corrective of an apophatic aesthetic. Reconsidering Pseudo-Dionysius's image of "sacred veils" to speak of the hiddenness of God may prove a starting point again. From theology emanating from the mystics we may still learn that the ineffability of God does not rule out God's desire for the soul and love for the world. In such theology we recognize how poetic discourses are at once appropriate and inadequate to the human desire for God.

Note

1   This legacy, however, was also controversial and highly contested by the church. Meister Eckhart's thought was deemed heretical, Bruno was executed, and Spinoza's views were suspect.

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CHAPTER 6

Heresy

J. Patrick Hornbeck II

Mystics and heretics both inhabit the margins of religious communities. In the west at least, mysticism and heresy usually entail claims of access to knowledge unknown to or else condemned by religious authorities. For the mystic, this knowledge takes the form of direct revelation, inaccessible through the ordinary channels of prayer, worship, reading, and teaching; for the heretic, it is knowledge that leads to the rejection or reformation of elements of the religious status quo. Thus, mysticism and heresy need not always go together, yet when a community places a premium on the authoritative interpretation of traditions of belief and practice, it becomes virtually inevitable that some individuals whose tellings of their mystical experiences challenge institutional and theological boundaries will fall under suspicion of heresy. Historically, as Don Cupitt has pointed out, the persecution of mystics by their fellow believers has been most marked in the history of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (4).

Even in the more magisterial Christian traditions, however, not every individual who has reported mystical experiences has been judged a heretic. Several in fact have been in the business of prosecuting heresy; for instance, not long after writing his sermons on the Song of Songs, the twelfth-century abbot Bernard of Clairvaux traveled widely in the south of France preaching against the dissenting groups whose names have come down to history as the Petrobrusians, Henricians, and Cathars (see Chapter 16, this volume). Something similar could be said of Augustine of Hippo, whose mysticism admittedly was of a different stripe (see Chapters 13 and 14, this volume). Still other mystics, like the French Carmelite Thérèse of Lisieux (see Chapter 34, this volume), have neither been accused of heresy nor sought it out in their contemporaries.

So why have some mystics been associated with heresy, while others have not? For Cupitt, mysticism – which he defines specifically as mystical writing – is "a tradition of protest. It is irregular and charismatic, not institutional; it is often lay rather than clerical, and its imagery is almost entirely feminine rather than masculine" (82). When a person, especially a female, engages in this tradition by writing a mystical text, just

by doing so she is participating in the subversion of religious authority, whether she intends to or not. But this cannot be the whole story: many women mystics have been celebrated rather than persecuted, and Cupitt's account tends to divorce mystics, their writings, and their persecution from the peculiarities of their individual historical contexts. Taking an opposite tack, the historian of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem argued in the 1960s that the link between mysticism and heresy is largely a matter of temperament and historical accident. According to Scholem, "All mysticism has two contradictory or complementary aspects: the one conservative, the other revolutionary" (quoted in McGinn 2004: 201). Mysticism can serve as a channel for development within a religious community, but when mystics' writings become too radical, or when external events sensitize religious authorities to the revolutionary potential of mystical writing, mystics and others can be forced into a choice between compliance or persecution.

More recently, Bernard McGinn has attempted to find a way between the essentialism of Cupitt's approach and the historical-accident theory of Scholem's. He located the source of tensions between mystics and religious authorities not in the mystics themselves but rather in the authorities' perceptions of them. The ecclesiopolitical dangers of mysticism "are not so much inherent to mysticism itself as they are expressive of the way in which the mystical aspect of the tradition comes to be viewed by the representatives of its institutional life and teaching" (202). In the late medieval period, suspicion of esoteric teaching, concerns about antinomianism and anti-sacramentalism, and the development of formal inquisitorial procedures all combined to create a climate unfriendly to mystics and their texts.

Endorsing for the most part McGinn's middle way, this essay surveys three sets of episodes from the late medieval and early modern periods of the history of Christianity: the persecutions of beguines, beghards, and other so-called "Free Spirit" heretics in France and Germany (see Chapter 22, this volume); the troubles of female mystics in late-fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England (see Chapter 24, this volume); and the suspicion of *alumbradismo* among mystical writers in sixteenth-century Spain (see Chapter 28, this volume). The focus of this chapter is on the response of church authorities to those they perceived to be heretical mystics, and on the ways in which such individuals attempted to shield themselves from criticism; as a result, I emphasize less the theological content of mystical writings, although a list of sources for further information appears in the bibliography. My focus here is also on historical context; the events I will be studying, which stretch roughly from 1150 to 1600, took place during a time of growing concern about heresy. In the late medieval period, the institutional church's increasingly bold claims to authority occurred against the backdrop of the emergence of popular heresies and, later, of papal schism, whereas in the sixteenth century the reformations of Luther, Calvin, and their contemporaries caused churches to prize theological conformity even more.[1]

All three episodes reveal several interlocking phenomena that mark the relationship between heresy and mysticism. On the one hand, the likelihood of a mystic being treated as a heretic increases when the mystic is perceived to subvert social norms, even when those norms are ancillary to the theological claims for which the mystic is called to account. A mystic may not just be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but also

occupy the wrong social location, speak or write the wrong language, possess the wrong gender, or, most importantly, make the wrong kinds of claims to authority. On the other hand, a mystic is also more likely to be treated as a heretic if she lives in a time or place of heightened concern about heresy, or if she is subject to the authority of particularly draconian ecclesiastical leaders; this can be true regardless of whether the mystic associates herself with or shares the same theological opinions as the heretics whose existence is troubling the community at large. The speed with which, in western Christianity at least, the appearance of heretics has led to the development in authorities' minds of hard-and-fast heretical identities has had as a consequence that mystics have often been assimilated by church leaders into broader patterns of dissenting belief and practice.

Beguines, Beghards, and Free Spirits

The high Middle Ages saw the flowering of a series of movements, lay as well as clerical, that sought a return to the *vita apostolica* – the life of prayer, poverty, and preaching that characterized the practice of Jesus' earliest followers. Among the most controversial of these new devotional movements was that of the beghards and beguines, groups of men and women who, while making no formal religious profession and following no single rule of life, lived in community together, vowing chastity and performing manual labor or begging for alms (see Chapter 22, this volume). The liminal quality of the beguines' life – they were neither precisely clerical nor precisely lay, recognized no rule and affiliated themselves with no religious order, and thus existed outside the standard ecclesiastical chains of command – rendered them susceptible to charges of heresy. That their desire to pursue the *vita apostolica* outside the normal channels of medieval religious practice resembled similar desires on the part of condemned groups like the Waldensians most certainly did not help. That many of their associates reported mystical experiences or developed mystical theologies was more problematic still.

Scholars date the establishment of the first organized beguinage, in Liège, to 1177, yet already by the 1230s the beguines' way of life had come under attack (Lambert 181). Philip, the chancellor of the University of Paris, denounced theoretically chaste beguines who had become pregnant by way of heretics and proclaimed that beghards, who for their part consorted with "little women," were the false prophets described in Paul's second letter to Timothy (Lerner 37–38). In 1274, the Second Council of Lyons received three tracts written by opponents of the beguines that accused them of living without discipline, falsely usurping the mendicant lifestyle that rightly belonged to the friars, and translating and publicly reading the scriptures in the vernacular. The council responded by reinforcing the prohibition on new religious orders that had been issued by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), writing: "We perpetually forbid absolutely all the forms of religious life and the mendicant orders founded after the said council which have not merited confirmation of the apostolic see, and we suppress them in so far as they have spread" (Tanner 1: 326). Widespread persecution of beghards, beguines, and beguinages soon followed: in 1286 the beghards of the town of Malines, in modern-day Belgium, were forcibly ejected from their convent; in 1290, beguines and beghards

were arrested in Colmar and Basel; in 1296, a beguine named Katherina had her contract with the Augustinian order in Mainz cancelled over suspicion of her orthodoxy (Lerner 62).

These anti-beguine efforts came to a head at the ecumenical council of Vienne, which convened in 1311–1313. The council pronounced this condemnation:

> The women commonly known as Beguines, since they promise obedience to nobody, nor renounce possessions, nor profess any approved rule, are not religious at all, although they wear the special dress of Beguines and attach themselves to certain religious to whom they have a special attraction . . . These Beguines thus ensnare many simple people, leading them into various errors . . . We expressly enjoin on these and other women, under pain of excommunication to be incurred automatically, that they no longer follow this way of life under any form, even if they adopted it long ago, or take it up anew. (Tanner 1: 374)

The council also issued a decree known to posterity as *Ad nostrum*, after the first two Latin words of its text. Here, the concern was less with the beguines' way of living than with their theology. The council attributed eight erroneous propositions to the "abominable sect of wicked men . . . and of faithless women" (1: 383). These include the claims that a person can in this life reach such a state of perfection that she becomes sinless and unable to make any further progress in grace; that after reaching this state, fasting, prayers, and all the commandments of the church are no longer necessary to the perfected soul; and that to show reverence to the consecrated eucharistic host is a sign of imperfection. According to the decree, the chief feature of the beguines' heresy was antinomianism – the belief that laws no longer apply to a soul that has attained perfection.

Where did the council obtain its information about the teachings of the beguines? Not from any large number of heresy trials or investigations conducted in advance of the meeting at Vienne, since "before 1312 beguines or beghards were charged with antinomian heresy only twice and in neither case is the evidence decisive" (Lerner 78). One of those cases, however, did prove critical to the formation in church leaders' minds of a heretical identity. In 1310, a beguine from Hainaut named Marguerite Porete was burned at the Place de Grève in Paris, her crime being not only that she had taught antinomianism but also that a previous trial (between 1306 and 1308), which had led to the public burning of her writings, had not provoked in her a change of heart. Porete was the author of a treatise in the vernacular, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, in which she had written that the soul "longs for nothing, says Reason, not contempt or poverty, not martyrdom or tribulations, not Masses or sermons, not fastings or prayers, and so she yields to Nature all that Nature asks with no qualms of conscience" (Porete 30). In the *Mirror*, she also distinguished between "Holy Church the Less, says Love, who is ruled by Reason" and "Holy Church the Great, says Divine Love, who is ruled by us," two figures which many have taken to be allegories for the visible, potentially corrupt church founded by humans and the invisible, immaculate divine reality founded by Christ (38; see Lerner 202–206 for discussion).

Its pedigree notwithstanding, Porete's book (with the name of its author safely expunged) was widely known among medieval religious communities and was translated into English as well as Italian. It was not until 1946 that book and author were reunited, and since then, scholars have been quick to point out that many of the supposedly damning quotations used against Porete were taken out of context.

Posterity, nevertheless, reflected for some time the preoccupations of Porete's inquisitors. Two of the propositions of *Ad nostrum* are drawn from the *Mirror*, and in turn, *Ad nostrum* provided a template for inquisitors searching for other heretics. Antinomianism also acquired a new, haunting name: "the heresy of the Free Spirit," drawn from the decree's report that heretical beguines and beghards claimed for themselves a "spirit of liberty." *Ad nostrum* purports to describe the existence of a sect of heretics with a well-defined set of teachings; it purports to be the response of church officials to an external challenge. In reality, however, it was the decree itself that created a new category for the identification and persecution of heresy; the decree, that grouped together and hereticated a particular family of ideas; the decree, that affixed a single name to a widely scattered set of individuals and communities who likely knew little about one another. In the wake of *Ad nostrum*, it became possible for inquisitors and other ecclesiastical officials who came across suspect teachings to label those teachings the heresy of the Free Spirit, and as a result, prosecutions for heresy increased sharply in frequency as well as intensity.

One of those caught up in the fervor that surrounded the new heresy was Eckhart von Hochheim (c. 1260–c. 1327), a Dominican preacher and mystic who had been living in Paris around the time of Porete's execution (see Chapter 23, this volume). Among his fellow residents in the Dominican convent of Saint-Jacques was Berengar of Landorra, a later master general of the order and one of the university theologians who had ruled unfavorably on Porete's orthodoxy (McGinn, *Eckhart* 1981: 8). It is possible that Eckhart learned from Berengar and others of the ideas that had led to Porete's condemnation; he must have been aware, at least, that Porete had been sent to the stake on account of heretical mysticism.

Over the course of the next two decades, Eckhart's preaching and writing landed himself in gradually more serious trouble with ecclesiastical authorities, who approached his case as that of a Free Spirit heretic. "Throughout, it is plain, Eckhart maintained that he was not guilty of the charges brought against him, because heresy is a matter of the will, and it was his intention to remain and die a faithful son of the Church" (11). Ultimately, these pleas culminated in a public (though apparently bungled) defense of his innocence in the Dominican church in Cologne in 1327, but Eckhart was unsuccessful; the case was transferred to Avignon, Pope John XXII ordered a commission to examine his writings, and John's successor Benedict XII promulgated on March 27, 1329, a bull condemning his views. *In agro dominico* lists twenty-eight propositions supposedly "preached" by Eckhart; in reality, he denied having taught the last two of them, and several others he had published in Latin treatises rather than taught to the public.

Eckhart was dead before the bull was published. The precise content of his theology remains a topic of some contention, but the key principles of his mysticism include an

emphasis on the agreement between the truths revealed by God in scripture and those available to human reason; an assertion of the utter simplicity of the divine essence; and a distinction between "the manifested Trinitarian God and the hidden Godhead" (McGinn, "God Beyond God" 1981: 2). On one reading of Eckhart, it is not possible to speak of any distinctions in God's nature, not even in terms of the persons of the Trinity. On another reading, as Bernard McGinn has shown, Eckhart was a master of paradox who did not fall into antitrinitarian heresy: "Eckhart seems to be asserting that the God beyond God, the hidden ground of the Trinity, is the more distinct insofar as he is distinct, the more one insofar as he is three. In other words, the dialectical relation between oneness and threeness in God is isomorphically similar to the transcendent-immanent relation of God to creatures" (McGinn, *Eckhart* 1981: 37).

Even more disturbing than this to Eckhart's contemporaries was the doctrine that several commentators have called the centerpiece of his theology: the birth of the Word of God in the human soul. In one of his sermons, Eckhart proclaimed of Christ, "I am so changed into him that he produces his being in me as one, not just similar. By the living God, this is true! There is no distinction" (188). Just a few years before the execution of Marguerite Porete, one of Eckhart's fellow Parisian masters, Henry of Friemar, had treaded lightly around this topic in his works. It clearly had the potential to rouse suspicion. Eckhart may well have believed that the notion that the Word is born into the heart of the baptized was an ancient Christian theme in need of recovery, regardless of the personal and political cost. For Eckhart's opponents, his relentless pursuit of this theme in his writing and preaching was his greatest error; indeed, at least five of the condemned propositions of *In agro dominico* engage the topic (52).

The anxieties provoked by the writings of beguine mystics such as Marguerite Porete and sustained through the controversies over Eckhart's mystical teachings were ecclesiological as much as they were theological in nature. As Amy Hollywood has influentially argued, the problem at root was a problem of authority: who should be permitted to talk about mystical ideas, to whom, and in what language? Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207–c. 1282/94), another beguine mystic but one who was not herself accused of heresy, took great pains in her book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* to distance herself from heretical theological claims and from what she perceived to be the excesses of her fellow beguines. She also attributed many of the ideas in her text to the direct revelation of God; indeed, she clearly marked such passages out as divine speech. "As a representative of the mainstream of the beguine movement, and one with a vested interest in keeping that movement alive as a viable alternative for religious women, Mechthild wishes to avoid the extremes of behavior suspected and prohibited by the ecclesiastical hierarchy" (Hollywood 53). Eckhart, who may have known Mechthild's book, likewise was able to claim authority as a teacher, priest, and member of an approved religious order. It appears that concerns were raised about his views only when he began to preach about them in the vernacular and to laypeople, although, as Hollywood has noted, "it was to a great extent among these laypeople, especially women, that the ideas had their genesis" (205). In contrast to Mechthild and Eckhart, Porete had little in the way of political and theological cover: *The Mirror of Simple Souls* does not, like Mechthild's *Flowing Light*, claim unambiguously the status of divine speech for its most controversial pronouncements, nor was Porete, like Eckhart, an

ecclesiastically sanctioned teacher. Instead, she was a woman writing in the vernacular without the protection of a religious community or powerful patron. It should be no surprise that of these three mystics, she was the one who met her end at the stake.

About a decade separated Eckhart's condemnation and death from the birth of Gerard Groote (1340–1384) in the Dutch city of Deventer. Groote became the founder of a movement known as the Modern-Day Devout (*Devotio Moderna*). Also called the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, the Devout resembled earlier beghards and beguines with their semi-religious communities, funds held in common, scheduled times for prayer, and interest in copying and selling manuscripts. Though the Devout were associated with a formal religious community in the Augustinian monastery of Windesheim, they faced many of the same pressures as their predecessors. In 1394 and 1395, two letters of Pope Boniface IX revoked many of the protections extended by previous papal decrees to congregations of men and women and reestablished a cadre of permanent Dominican inquisitors. In one of these letters, *Sedis apostolice*, the pope described the " 'cancer of heresy' infiltrating those parts [of the Holy Roman Empire]. He had also learned that such 'Beghards' and 'Lollards' and 'Swestriones' were now protecting themselves with papal law. So he revoked those laws, and called for the guilty to be punished" (Van Engen 103).

The Devout were rarely accused of Free Spirit heresy *per se*, yet the similarities between their communal life and that of the putative Free Spirit beguines and beghards of a century earlier were inescapable. Here as elsewhere in the history of Christianity, the Devout experienced a form of guilt by association: their way of life, their spirituality, and their pursuit of theological knowledge outside the channels of traditional religion all marked them as potentially worrisome. The terms of suspicion directed at them, however, were largely conditioned by prevailing worries about the heresy of the Free Spirit. Documents such as *Ad nostrum* provided the Devout's opponents with a specific lens through which to view them, indeed a lens through which to pigeonhole the beliefs of Groote and his followers. While their movement survived to exert substantial influence on late medieval spirituality and education, their emergence at a time of widespread concern about a specific form of vernacular heresy all but determined the contours of the institutional church's response to this new form of lay piety.

Anxieties about "Lollards": Middle English Mystics and Heretics

We have just seen that Boniface IX used the terms *beghards*, *lollards*, and *swestriones* to refer disparagingly to the members of communities such as Groote's. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the first two of these epithets were virtually synonymous in continental Europe (Lerner 40). Across the English Channel, however, where beguinages were far fewer in number, "lollard" was by far the most prevalent term of abuse for vernacular heretics and other religious outsiders.

Centuries of scholarship on the "Lollard movement" inspired and supposedly organized by the Oxford philosopher and theologian John Wyclif have obscured the full semantic range of the term "lollard." In reality, not only did Wyclif's followers and their

descendants differ quite substantially from one another on basic theological issues, but as a number of recent studies have shown, Wycliffism was not the only form of religious dissent in late medieval England (Hornbeck; Cole; Kerby-Fulton).[2] Wycliffism did, nevertheless, create grave concern in the minds of officials about the spread of heresy among laypeople. In the Wycliffite movement's attempts to disseminate the biblical text and theological reflections on it in the vernacular, in the connection between Wycliffite ideas and political sedition perceived by church leaders to underpin both the "Peasants' Revolt" of 1381 and the 1414 rebellion of Sir John Oldcastle, and in the detection of substantial numbers of lay dissenters in urban centers, English church leaders discerned a profound challenge to their authority. Given the long-standing tendency of Christian heresiography to describe heresy as the work of sects, not scattered individuals, and given the political benefits of a campaign against a religious other at a time of worry about national unity, it is hardly surprising that churchmen perceived themselves to be confronting an organized movement, with a heresiarch, doctrines, writings, and secret passwords (Aston; Catto).

It was, therefore, in an environment of heightened concern that two of the best-known English mystics of the later Middle Ages produced their works. Julian of Norwich experienced sixteen "showings" from God while in a deep illness in May 1373 and subsequently became an anchoress, a hermit living in a cell attached to a church and devoting herself to ascetic practices (see Chapter 24, this volume). She wrote the story of her revelations in two versions, the so-called Short Text and, twenty years later or more, the Long Text. While many details of Julian's life, including the sources of her formidable theological knowledge, are unknown, she does appear as a character in the writings of another contemporary mystic, Margery Kempe.

Kempe, too, remains an elusive figure. The daughter of a former mayor of King's Lynn, a wife, mother of fourteen, and owner of a prominent but ultimately unsuccessful brewing business, Margery described in her *Book* her revelations from God; her desire to take up a life of devotion, chastity, and pilgrimage; and the fierce opposition she encountered. In the *Book*, which claims to have been written down at her dictation by two scribes, Kempe recounted her visit to Julian's cell in Norwich, where

> [t]he anchoress, hearing the marvelous goodness of our Lord, thanked God highly with all her heart for his visitation, counseling this creature [i.e., Margery] to be obedient to the will of our Lord God and fulfill with all her might whatever he might put into her soul, if it were not against the worship of God and the profit of her fellow Christians. For if it were, then it were not the inspiration of a good spirit, but rather of an evil spirit. (Kempe 53; translation mine)

For Margery, fulfilling God's will becomes a matter of suffering along with Christ, whose passion provokes in her so many tears, exclamations, and seizures that she is shunned by fellow churchgoers, pilgrims, and preachers. Andrew Cole has argued that central to Margery's self-fashioning is a sense of shame – in particular, the sort of shame associated with the charge of lollardy (Cole 161–168). By way of illustration, take this excerpt from Margery's rejoinder to monks who were insulting her in Canterbury: "While I was at home in my own part of the country – day by day with great weeping

and mourning – I sorrowed because I did not have any of the shame, scorn, and contempt that I deserved" (Kempe 64).

Throughout the events narrated in her *Book*, Margery encountered church and civil leaders who branded her a lollard. It is nevertheless clear that, for all her strangeness, her theological views were not unorthodox. Called before the abbot and dean of Leicester, for example, she offered an airtight account of eucharistic doctrine (Kempe 152–153). The charges nevertheless persisted, illustrating that in the minds of many medieval English people, particularly after 1414, lollardy was less a matter of doctrine than of behavior, less an issue of heresy than of dissent (Shklar 294). Margery's willingness to transgress the customary boundaries of her position in society – lay, female, married, illiterate – seems to be at the root of these complaints. Her public preaching as a woman, her ability to recount biblical stories, her abandonment of the normal routines and markers of married life for a new existence as a solitary, itinerant mystic, and her stalwart defense of her vocation in front of both English archbishops, other church leaders, and a host of civic worthies all helped to put her in the place of shame that, in her view, united herself with Christ.

Like the continental mystics of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries who came under suspicion of Free Spirit heresy, English mystics of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries negotiated a complex web of concerns about authority, gender, and dissent. Both Julian and Margery grappled in their texts with their identity as women who claim teaching authority, especially in the face of suspicion on the part of church leaders that "all women who appeared literate were heretics" (Shklar 284). For Julian, this grappling took different forms in the Short Text as opposed to the Long Text. In the former, she acknowledged her gender and, not unlike Mechthild, attributed all her theological claims to God, rendering herself merely the vessel in and through which God had communicated revelations. In the latter, by contrast, Julian removed all marks of female authorship. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has argued, "Julian . . . wanted to be taken seriously as a visionary of intellectual vision, and may have felt that her gender was in the way" (312). Like Julian, Margery also depicted herself as the recipient of divine communication, but the autobiographical layout of her *Book* required her to engage more directly with contemporary controversies, especially lollardy. Her claims to authority were in many senses more bold than Julian's, a fact that may help to explain the volume of scholarly studies dedicated to her affiliations with dissenting movements. Not only did she insist upon the legitimacy of her vocation as a chaste, married woman sent directly by Christ as a teacher, but also in recounting and refiguring her examinations before bishops and their assistants did she take on a role normally reserved for ecclesiastical officials (Shklar 278–279).

As women living and teaching in the pervasively patriarchal milieu of late medieval Christianity, it was all but certain that Julian and Margery would encounter suspicion. It is nevertheless hard to imagine that their location in late medieval England, where vernacular heresy was already so prominent an issue and where the role of women was already a flash point for concern, did not substantially raise the stakes. Margery, as we have seen, showed few marks of Wycliffite identity – her speech did not follow Wycliffite patterns, her theological claims were orthodox, and contrary to what church officials believed, few Wycliffite communities embraced women leaders. Nevertheless,

if her report is to be believed, her contemporaries viewed her through a lens shaped almost entirely by the English church's response to Wycliffism.

Dangerous Mysticism in Early Modern Spain

The expectations of inquisitors also played a defining role in the persecution of mystically inclined heretics in sixteenth-century Spain. In 1509, the Dominican tertiary Maria de Santo Domingo de Piedrahita was tried for heretical mysticism; she confessed and was absolved, and the matter laid to rest. Ten years later, information began to reach the inquisition about a group of mystics who had advocated the practice of *dejamiento*, "abandonment, passive reliance on the divine will, a devotional state in which no special form of prayer or place suitable for meditation was required but which brought about a condition of perfection" (Hamilton 28–29). These individuals quickly acquired the derogatory epithet *alumbrados* ("the illuminated ones"), and in 1525, the inquisitor-general Alonso Manrique, archbishop of Seville, issued an edict condemning as heretical 48 propositions they reportedly had taught. Just as *Ad nostrum* did for the heresy of the Free Spirit, this edict marked the birth of *alumbradismo* in the minds of inquisitors and later historians. The comparison is not an arbitrary one; some of the propositions listed in Manrique's document were drawn directly from *Ad nostrum*, though others reflected concern about Lutheran doctrines that had recently emerged. A number of the condemned propositions rejected the cult of the saints, the use of images in prayer and devotion, and church rituals (Hamilton 36–43).

Alumbradismo was thus a matter of great ambiguity. It referred, in the wake of the 1525 edict, to a specific set of ideas, but those ideas by no means formed a coherent theological system (Hamilton 28). One scholar has noted that, as a result, anyone in this period who "manifested extraordinary signs of spirituality and of religious experience, or proclaimed teachings in any way different from accepted patterns, was considered to be *Alumbrado*." The label, therefore, is "too broad to be considered as representative of any definite movement or sect" (Tapia 18–19). Yet however vague a concept it was theologically, the existence of *alumbradismo* in the inquisitorial imagination remained an unavoidable fact of sixteenth-century Spanish religious life. So also was the widespread suspicion of *conversos*, Jews or Muslims who had converted to Christianity in the previous century and were subject to formal restrictions (in terms, e.g., of holding office under the Spanish crown) and frequent discrimination.

The emergence of a female religious leader who was both of *conversa* descent and a compelling writer on the theme of the union of the soul with God was thus all but certain to spark controversy. Teresa of Avila was born in 1515 and joined a Carmelite convent in 1535. Nearly twenty years later, Teresa began to have profound mystical experiences, including a vision of hell that left her convinced that her order needed renewal. In 1562, she re-founded the Carmelite community of St. Joseph of Avila under a stricter rule of life; by the time of her death in 1582, she had repeated this process on thirteen other occasions. Teresa's "discalced" Carmelites, so named for their practice of going about without shoes, emphasized private and communal prayer in opposition to hierarchy and formality. Quite early on, Teresa's movement attracted the attention

of Juan de Yepes, the disowned son of a wealthy father who had entered the Carmelite order in 1563 and was dissatisfied with his fellow friars' pursuit of academic and worldly honors. He met Teresa in 1567, when he was twenty-five years old and she fifty-two, and made his profession as a discalced Carmelite the following year, taking the name John of the Cross (see Chapter 28, this volume).

Unsurprisingly, neither Teresa nor John escaped the attention of inquisitors, who formally investigated Teresa five times. Gillian Ahlgren has asserted, in fact, that "Teresa's interaction with the Inquisition – both direct and indirect – was the most significant influence on her career as a writer" (Ahlgren 1996:33).[3] The loss of key documents has made it impossible to trace every contour of Teresa's bouts with the inquisition, but it is clear that the key issues were questions about the legitimacy of her mystical experiences, of her reforms, and of her position as a female teacher without formal training in theology (64–67). In 1580, she was ordered by a theologian in the employ of the inquisition to destroy the manuscript of her *Meditaciones sobre los Cantares* (*Meditations on the Song of Songs*); the work nevertheless survived in copies made and hidden by her fellow nuns (Slade 29). In contrast, John's troubles were more political than theological: around the same time Teresa was facing her most serious inquisitorial trial, John was arrested by Carmelite leaders after having taken up the role of prior of Teresa's community. He was released by command of the papal nuncio, Nicolás Ormaneto, but arrested again when the nuncio died soon thereafter. The new nuncio, Felipe Sega, was unsympathetic to the discalced Carmelites, meddling in the order's internal elections and declaring the acts of its chapter null and void. Nevertheless, despite having written substantial mystical works of his own, John did not appear before inquisitors on the charge of heresy.

What about Teresa and her mysticism left her open to suspicion? First, there were the similarities between Teresa's teachings, for instance in her *Life* (1565) and *Interior Castle* (1577), and those attributed to the Free Spirit and *alumbrado* heretics of recent memory. Both Teresa's visions and her desire to attain mystical union with God – a desire consummated in the spiritual marriage to Christ that she experienced in 1572 – placed her on the fuzzy margins of orthodoxy. Particularly troubling for inquisitors was the charge that Teresa had taught that "once the soul has achieved union with God in mental prayer, the devil could do it no harm" (Ahlgren 1996: 132). Even though Teresa specifically denied sinlessness even to the soul fully united with God in the seventh and final "dwelling place" of the castle of the soul, this claim recalled the heresies condemned in *Ad nostrum* too specifically for inquisitors not to take notice. Second, in the wake of the 1559 *Index of Prohibited Books*, which had forbidden the circulation of vernacular mystical texts, Teresa's use of the Spanish language was problematic. And then there was the question of her gender: after the *alumbrado* trials had come to an end in the 1540s, almost all later claims to mystical experience were viewed with suspicion, but the standards that church officials used to judge such cases were far stricter when the suspect in question was female (Ahlgren 1995: 374).[4]

Like Julian of Norwich before her, Teresa employed a range of strategies to counter the force of these criticisms. As Ahlgren has persuasively argued, Teresa developed a "rhetoric of humility . . . designed to present herself in a nonthreatening way" (Ahlgren 1996: 67–68). In addition to locating the sources of her mysticism firmly within the

sacramental life of the church, Teresa cited such thoroughly orthodox mystics as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St.-Thierry, and Richard of St. Victor, figures whose place in the tradition was beyond reproach. The resemblance of their views to hers provided a valuable counterweight to comparisons between Teresa, Free Spirits, and *alumbrados* and helped establish Teresa as a mystical teacher whose visions could be trusted as having come from God. The cost, once again, came in terms of a lack of specificity about gender. If Teresa were to be accepted as an orthodox mystic, her female identity was a liability. In the *Way of Perfection*, Teresa wrote to her nuns that "I would not want you, my daughters, to be womanly in any way nor to seem so, but [to be] strong men; for if you do what is in you, the Lord will make you so manly that men will be shocked" (quoted in Ahlgren 1995: 381). On the one hand, Teresa's pursuit of a masculine identity as a writer – or at least her disavowal of a specifically feminine identity – recalls Julian of Norwich's decision to omit references to her gender from the Long Text. On the other hand, such a rhetorical strategy likely contributed much to Teresa's having survived five rounds of inquisitorial investigations unscathed. She was canonized by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 and in 1970 was one of the first two women to be awarded the title Doctor of the Church.

Conclusions

The phenomena we have seen at work in the persecution of men and women as Free Spirit, lollard, and *alumbrado* heretics are by no means limited to those groups: similar dynamics have been at work throughout the history of Christianity, whether in the debates about Origenist mysticism in the third century, the controversies over voluntary poverty and Joachimist prophecy in the thirteenth and fourteenth, or disputes about the legitimacy of stigmatic mystics in the twentieth. With their claims to revelations obtained outside normative structures of interpretation and authority, mystics as a group have never quite been able to avoid the charge of heresy.

   Nevertheless, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that any given mystic will have faced suspicion about her or his orthodoxy. As these episodes illustrate, a complex matrix of factors shapes the reception of mystical teachings: among them, the extent to which a mystic can claim authority, either as a transcriber of divine revelation or a teacher in her own right; whether a mystic breaches social norms by writing or preaching to popular audiences or in the vernacular; and how a mystic, if she is female, presents herself with respect to her gender. A second set of factors comes from the external context. The emergence (even if only in the inquisitorial imagination) of a heretical movement in a certain milieu almost inevitably colors the treatment of mystics who have the misfortune of living in that same time and place; it results in a heightened sense of suspicion on the part of inquisitors, and it provides the terms by which the orthodoxy of such mystics will be evaluated. Conversely, yet simultaneously, the teachings of some mystics have provided organizational schemata for inquisitors' views of heresy. Thus, anxiety about the spread of the beguinal way of life may have given an extra impetus to the examination and condemnation of Marguerite Porete, whose work in turn provided fodder for the list of Free Spirit heresies condemned in *Ad nostrum*, which in its

own turn provided a yardstick by which later heresy suspects in France and Germany (such as Meister Eckhart) as well as Spain (such as Teresa of Avila) were judged.

The extrapolation of a heretical "school of thought" from the work of an individual dissenter is a phenomenon by no means confined to mystical writers; it was certainly the case with early figures like Arius and Nestorius just as much as with medieval theologians like Joachim of Fiore and John Wyclif. Nevertheless, the urge on the part of inquisitors to categorize heresies – an urge learned in no small part from the encyclopedias of heresy they inherited from their predecessors – can be especially misleading in the case of mystics, whose writings have so often tried to break down pre-existing theological categories. It is the scholar's task to study each instance of the interplay between mysticism and heresy on its own terms, untangling whatever webs of association inquisitors and earlier historians have foisted on the sources. Only then can the interlocking relationships between mystical writers, mystical texts, heresy suspects, heretical movements, church authorities, and ecclesiastical documents be properly understood.

Notes

1   The persecution of mystical and prophetic believers was by no means, as this essay's choice of episodes might be thought to suggest, the exclusive property of Roman Catholics; among many others, the radical reformer Thomas Müntzer (c. 1488–1525), the visionary shoemaker Jakob Böhme (c. 1575–1624), and the English prophet Lodowicke Muggleton (1609–1698) were suspected of heresy or blasphemy by their Protestant communities. Limitations of space have prevented the inclusion of more than passing references to post-Reformation mysticism in the Christian west, not to mention mysticism in the Christian east.

2   There is not space here to offer a full account of Wycliffite doctrine, especially since recent research has emphasized the differences in belief among Wyclif's followers. Nevertheless, the Wycliffite heresy was known in its own day primarily on account of its denial of transubstantiation, its endorsement of the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, its rejection of traditional understandings of the other sacraments, and its criticism of priests whose lives were at variance with the apostolic example.

3   It may be helpful to note that the Spanish Inquisition was a distinct office, established in 1478 by King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile; it reported to the crown rather than to the papacy. In this regard, it differed substantially from earlier manifestations of inquisition (which was in medieval canon law a procedure rather than an office) in France, the German territories, and England.

4   There is not space here to describe in detail the charges of *alumbradismo* against Iñigo (later Ignatius) de Loyola, but suffice it to say that though the founder of the Society of Jesus faced on several occasions charges similar to those made against Teresa, the inquisitorial proceedings against a male of the minor nobility were far less protracted.

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PART II

Early Christian Mysticism

CHAPTER 7

Mysticism in the New Testament

Alan C. Mitchell

The word "mysticism" appears in none of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Therefore, it may seem peculiar to include an essay on mysticism in the New Testament in a companion volume to the study of Christian mysticism. And yet, scholars have written about "mysticism" in the New Testament or "mystical themes" in New Testament authors. When they do so, they do not point to a fully developed understanding of mysticism, as found in later Christian authors, but rather they explore the ways New Testament authors describe access to the divine, or how union with God and Christ is experienced in the lives of the earliest Christians. And so, rather than isolating the elements of a full-blown mysticism in the New Testament, it is preferable to explore the ways New Testament books attest to palpable awareness of God, sometimes employing the vocabulary associated with revelations and visions, but more often attending to how faith makes possible a lived experience of God. Until recently, those religious experiences received little attention as "religious experience" *per se*. Currently, however, New Testament scholars are less reticent to isolate and discuss the religious experiences of early Christians and how they may have been recorded within given New Testament books. In particular, Luke Timothy Johnson has offered a definiton of religious experience that he has adapted from the work of Joachim Wach (Wach 27–58) and that is very helpful for assessing what may have constituted this phenomenon among Early Christians: "Religious experience is a response to that which is perceived as ultimate, involving the whole person, characterized by a peculiar intensity, and issuing in action" (Johnson 60). This study relies on this definition of religious experience, but it focuses on particular types of religious experiences – namely, those related to having access to God and achieving union with God and Christ.

This essay explores, first, religious experience in the earliest New Testament author, Paul of Tarsus. Drawing on his Jewish origins, Paul speaks of his religious experience in language at home in Jewish apocalyptic literature, where revelations and heavenly journeys are commonly the means of access to God and the vehicles for apprehending

phenomena of the heavenly realm. At the heart of Paul's religious experience is his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. His own descriptions of that revelation (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8; Galatians 1:15–16; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6) lack the detailed narrative of the experience as described in Luke's Acts of the Apostles (9:1–19; 22:6–15; 26:12–17), but there is no mistaking the effects of this ecstatic experience on Paul himself. His whole life was changed by this experience of Christ, which grounded his subsequent religious experiences that constitute his understanding of what and how he lives in Christ and Christ lives in him. Whether Paul considered himself to be a mystic cannot be determined from his writings, but the way he described his religious experience seems to be antecedent to the descriptions of similar revelations and experiences that we find among later representatives of the Christian mystical tradition.

This essay then moves to the Gospel of John and examines how the mutual indwelling of the divine among God, Jesus, and the believer expresses the divine immanence within the johannine Christians and the communities they formed. John's mysticism of immanence derives from the realized eschatology that pervades his gospel. The unity of God and Jesus is the model for the unity of johannine Christians, who experience the divine in the mundane world, even amid its opposition to Jesus and God. The love they have for each other is the signature expression of the divine immanence they share, for its source is the love shared between the Father and the Son. For johannine Christians divine immanence is akin to the Pauline experience of being in Christ.

Finally, this essay turns to Hebrews, an early Christian sermon that shares features of later Jewish mystical traditions but appropriates them for a different purpose – namely, bringing its readers to union with the divine. Hebrews counsels a mysticism of endurance, which facilitates the transcendence of the present, so as to live with the future always in mind. The mysticism of Hebrews does not enjoin ecstatic visions or heavenly journeys so much as it emphasizes living in the mundane world as though one were already enjoying the benefits of the heavenly sanctuary. The community of Hebrews accomplishes this union with the divine by living faithfully, or "holding fast," and by uniting themselves to God in worship and prayer.

Space does not permit an examination of every New Testament text that discloses some affinity with experiences that are associated with later developed mystical traditions. Therefore, this essay focuses on the Letters of Paul, the Gospel of John, and Hebrews because each, in its own way, addresses access to the divine and union with God and Christ, themes that become important elements of the Christian mystical tradition. Although they are distinct in genre, they describe or propose religious experiences for their readers that share some common features related to participating in or accessing the divine life through faith. For Paul it is living in Christ and conformity with Christ. For John, it is the mutual undwelling of God and Christ with the believer. For Hebrews it is journeying towards God while living in God's presence.

Whereas this essay notes the comparisons some scholars have made between texts of Paul, John, and Hebrews with elements of the developing Jewish mystical traditions, it should be noted that other scholars have broadened the picture to include the similarities they have found within Greco-Roman literature. Unfortunately, these rich comparisons cannot be discussed in an essay of this length. The reader may want to consult their works for further study (see Tabor; Wallace; Windisch).

Revelation and Religious Experience in Paul

Paul of Tarsus may have been born shortly before or after Jesus himself. He was a Pharisaic Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3) who, at first, opposed the followers of Jesus, but then joined them after undergoing a profound religious experience, while he was traveling to Damascus. He believed that he had been given a revelation of Jesus Christ and a commission to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles. With this purpose he established churches in the Mediterranean world with which he communicated by letters, which are the earliest writings in the New Testament.

When Paul described his religious experiences, he invoked the verb "to reveal" (*apokalyptein*: Galatians 1:16) or the noun "revelation" (*apokalypsis*: Galatians 1:12; 2 Corinthians 12:7). Both usages capture the sense of what he experienced as outside of himself and not something that he had produced. The importance of the revelation or experience as being external to the person receiving it, in the sense of not being self-produced, is a standard feature of descriptions or definitions of religious experience (Johnson 61). What makes the experiences of these revelations akin to mystical encounters is also due to the fact that Paul had interiorized them. It should be noted, however, that the application of the term "mysticism" to Paul's religious experiences has not met with universal agreement (Sanders 433–435).

The place to begin in examining Paul's religious experience is his own account of what had happened to him on the road to Damascus. The usual translation of Galatians 1:15–16 is "But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being."[1] Paul literally wrote, however, that God was pleased "to reveal his Son in me" (*en emoi*). This translation suggests a more complete involvement of the human subject with the revelation than the translation "to me," which has more the character of cognitive witness than of participation. Some see the interiorizing of the revelation as a feature that defines the experience as "religious" (Engberg-Pederson 151–152) (see Chapter 8, this volume). When an experience has been internalized by the subject, it gains a character of intensity that is transformative, having the power to reorient one's life. We see this in Paul after his Damascus experience, where the result was a dramatic shift from persecuting Christianity to joining it, with the goal of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. The transformation effected by religious experience is expressed in actions (Johnson 60–67). Therefore, in the case of Paul's religious experience, described as God's revelation of Jesus Christ *in him*, this transformation translates into "conversion" or "call" to follow Christ.

The intensity of the revelation on the road to Damascus may have been momentary for Paul, but it appears, nevertheless, to have had a durative quality, forming what one may see as his relationship with the Christ, whom God had revealed *in him*. The religious experience on the road to Damascus that led to the transformation of his life served then as the ground for a new perception. Paul knew that he was different from whom he had been before. And so Paul could write in Galatians 2:19–20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives *in me*. And

the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (emphases added). For Paul to be crucified with Christ was to have undergone a transformation from the life of the flesh to the life of the spirit, where the faith of Jesus Christ is now a constitutive factor that marks the change (see Romans 8:9). Paul explains this practical effect of being crucified with Christ in Galatians 5:24: "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." In Romans 6:6, referring to baptism, Paul writes, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (cf. Galatians 6:14). It is this same death to the old self that resulted from his encounter with the risen Christ and transformed him into a new self, which he likened to a new creation in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Moreover, this transformation will ultimately survive physical death, as bodily reality becomes spiritual reality in the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:42–49). This transformation from death to life, which formed the heart of Paul's "Christ mysticism," is the key to understanding Paul's religious experience in all of its dimensions (Schweitzer 3).

Yet another dimension of the transformation that resulted from Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is the conformity with Christ that characterized his new life. Paul nowhere speaks more forcefully of this conformity than in Philippians 3:7–10, where he describes his past life as loss in comparison with the surpassing value of his knowledge of Jesus Christ. In place of that loss he sought to gain Christ and to be found *in him* (Philippians 3:8–9). The passive construction affirms that, like the revelation of Christ in him, this experience, too, was not produced by Paul himself but had come from outside of him. And yet, the spatial language also recalls the unity that Paul felt that he had with Christ that echoes the language of internalization, as found in his description of his experience on the road to Damascus. God had revealed Christ *in him*, and now Paul wanted nothing more than to be found *in Christ* (Engberg-Pederson 154). He goes on to say that being so located in Christ means not only to know Christ, but to know as well the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to become like him in his death (Philippians 3:10). All of these things Paul casts as his goal: to possess Christ as Christ has possessed him (Philippians 3:12), but in light of what he said about how he has been crucified with Christ and how Christ now lives in him (Galatians 2:19–20) the experience of being united with Christ was already a part of his present reality. What remained was, as he says in Philippians, the experience of Christ's resurrection (Philippians 3:11). If living in union with Christ were not part of Paul's everyday experience, he would not have been so concerned that some Corinthians claimed that Christ was not speaking through him (2 Corinthians 13:3). Such a criticism challenged the heart of Paul's claim that he had preached the Gospel authentically because the truth of Christ was indeed in him (2 Corinthians 11:10; Romans 9:1). The function of such an oath formula was to testify not so much to the content of the Gospel itself, but to the fact that Paul preached it truthfully as only one who was united with Christ could (Furnish 493; Fitzmyer 1992: 543). His union with Christ was the basis for the reliability of what he had preached about Christ. This union enabled Paul to say elsewhere "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16).

The experience that most resembles visionary mysticism is the one Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10. Our ability to understand precisely what kind of religious experience he had is hampered by the fact that he is reluctant to speak about it. If his opponents were claiming authority on the basis of visions and revelations, so also could he, even while discounting the importance of such phenomena. As he says, he would rather boast in his weakness (2 Corinthians 12:5), yet he feels that taking up the topic of visions and revelations is necessary at this point in his own self-defense (Meeks 1983: 72; Lincoln 207–209). Furthermore, Paul does not explicitly identify himself as the subject of the visions or revelations, claiming only to know "a person in Christ" who was. Despite the fact that some have claimed that Paul was speaking about someone else, even perhaps his opponents (Betz 84–96), the consensus among New Testament scholars is that he is really speaking about his own visionary experience. Two things in the text indicate that the experience was Paul's. First, the identification of "a person in Christ" (v. 2) recalls Paul's frequent references to himself as being in Christ. Second, he says he was given a "thorn in the flesh" (v. 7) to prevent him from becoming too "elated" over the visions and revelations that he had experienced. Indeed, in verses 5 and 6 Paul says he will not boast about the visions and revelations as his own, because he prefers to boast only in his weakness. He goes on to say that, if he wished to boast about the visions and revelations, he would not be a fool, because he would be speaking the truth. The only way Paul could verify the veracity of the claim to visions and revelations is if he had experienced them himself (Wallace 24).

The fact that Paul cannot say whether the experience was "in the body or out of the body" (v. 3) renders his description of it somewhat ambiguous, yet it is likely that he is referring to an ecstatic experience of some kind. In Hellenistic literature, trips to heaven can be made either in the body or out of it by means of bodily ascension or the journey of the soul; hence, the ambiguity ultimately does not negate the experience (Baird 654). Despite Paul's seeming indifference about how the experience was mediated to him, he does say clearly that he was "caught up" (*harpazein*) in two ways. The first was up to the "third heaven" (v. 2) and, then, to "Paradise" (v. 4). In Jewish apocalyptic literature the enumeration of the heavens vary. Sometimes three heavens are spoken of, but there are also references to five, seven, and ten, as well (Lincoln 212–213). In some rabbinic tractates the ten levels of heaven are divided into seven lesser ones and three greater ones, where the latter represent the highest part of the heavens, the location where one ultimately encounters the divine (see Chapter 8, this volume). Whereas many scholars favor the view that Paul understood heaven to have three levels, thus equating the "third heaven" with "Paradise," it is equally likely that Paul was referring only to the three greater levels. Therefore his journey would place him in the innermost heaven in the presence of the divine. Then again, some claim that Paul made the ascent in two phases, one bringing him to the third heaven and then another going beyond into Paradise (Tabor 120). Others, thinking that Paul knew of seven heavens, interpret his having made it only to the third as a function of the weakness theme that pervades this text (Gooder 190–211). In keeping with his boasting in his weakness, he would then think it valuable to show that, even if he could claim visions and revelations, he could only claim a lesser version than his opponents may have had (Ashton 119). This view, however, seems not to account for the fact that Paul believed his opponents were

not equal to him and that he was in no way inferior to them (2 Corinthians 11:5 and 7). There is nothing in the text itself that suggest that Paul is describing anything more than a unitary experience. He is not relating two distinct experiences or two phases of one experience, but rather a single journey where he had been taken to the highest part of heaven (Furnish 542). Therefore, it is likely that he understood himself to have been taken into the third, which he identifies with "Paradise."

Paul says that while in Paradise he heard things that "are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (v. 4). Such a description suggests a standard feature of apocalyptic literature that characterizes the revelations granted to a person undergoing a visionary experience as secret. The revelation is frequently something to be sealed up and not to be revealed, unless its disclosure has been specified according to a set time-table (Daniel 12:4; Revelation 10:4). The formulation Paul used does not indicate that he should not have been told what he heard because it was ineffable or inscrutable; rather, the revelation is described as unspeakable and something that may not be repeated. Paul, then, seems to have understood that what was revealed to him was highly esoteric, as the Greek (*arrēta hrēmata*) connotes. The adjective "not to be told" (*arrētos*, v. 4) occurs in relation to Mystery cults where it refers to things learned by initiates that were meant to be kept secret (Furnish 527; Lincoln 216).

Paul's description of his visionary experience shows also his affinity with the mystical tradition of Judaism. Scholars, for some time now, have tried to locate the experience Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 within the developing tradition of *merkabah* or throne mysticism, which features heavenly ascent on the basis of Ezekiel 1:26–28 (Boussett 229–273; Windisch 375–376; Scholem 14–19) (see Chapters 8 and 9, this volume). Were this the case, 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 could be the earliest extant first person account of a *merkabah* experience (Segal 51–52).

Scholars who have pursued possible links between Paul's description of his heavenly journey and the *merkabah* traditions have relied largely on the rabbinic legend of four rabbis, including Rabbi Aqiba, who made a similar journey to Paradise (see Chapter 8, this volume). The story is preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Hagiga 14b; 15 a, b), the Jerusalem Talmud (y. Hagiga 77b), the Tosefta (t. Hagiga 2:3–5) and in the *hekhalot* literature (Hekhalot Zutarti). In the story, only Rabbi Aqiba is permitted to behold the glory of God. The other three rabbis perish. Apart from the ascent motif and the mention of Paradise, however, there are no literary links between this story and 2 Corinthians 12:1–10. The late dating of the rabbinic story also presents an obstacle to using it to interpret the experience Paul relates in this text. Consequently, not all scholars agree that 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 should be read in relation to that tradition (Wallace 1–23, 333–337). The value of the comparison between Paul and the rabbis may simply lie in the possible common source for visionary experience in each in Second Temple apocalyptic literature.

Experiencing God in Christ and the Mysticism of Immanence in John's Gospel

John's Gospel is the latest extant canonical Gospel and was composed at the end of the first century CE. Its author is unknown. The members of the community for which it

was written seem to have belonged to a Palestinian synagogue from which they were separated. This setting accounts for the sectarian nature of the Gospel, with its intense communitarian focus that counsels love of one another (John 13:34; 15:12,17) as its primary command. John's Gospel is significantly different from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Its presentation of Jesus as the pre-existent word of God (1:1), incarnate (1:14), and divine (20:28) is distinctive among the Gospel portraits of Jesus.

The basis for religious experience in the Gospel of John lies in the access to God that Jesus himself provides. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus' identification with God is both directly and indirectly expressed. John's Jesus says openly, "The Father and I are one" (10:30), "Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me" (12:45), and "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (14:10). Even Jesus' opponents recognize his union with God, when they accuse him of making himself equal to God (5:18; 10:33). Jesus himself confirms their conclusion in his assessment of why they oppose him, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (8:19). For those who do know Jesus, the sentiment finds a positive expression: "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:7). To the extent that the mystical involves seeing God, John's presentation of Jesus as the one through whom the believer has access to God can be thought of as mystical.

Perhaps the most mystical sounding text in John is "we have seen his glory" in 1:14. It recalls the *kabōd* of the Jewish mystical tradition, but it is not exactly equivalent to it. John's formulation, "the glory *as of* a father's son," suggests that what was seen was not the glory of God directly. It was possible for prophets to experience the glory of God differently than mystics. Whereas mystics experience the glory of God directly and immediately, prophets have less direct and more mediated experiences of that glory (Isaiah 6:3; 24:23; 60:1; Ezekiel 3:12; 10:4; 43:2; Habakkuk 2:14; Zechariah 2:5). In the foundational text for the *merkabah* experience, Ezekiel 1:28, we find, "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." Ezekiel had not seen God's glory, or even a likeness of it, but the appearance of the likeness of the God's glory (Soltes 28). John's use of "as of" (*hōs*) is, then, not insignificant and may have the following consequences for interpretation. First, no visionary experience is associated with seeing his "glory"; it is, rather, apprehended with the eyes of faith. Second, seeing the "glory" of Jesus occurs only in relation to his incarnation, as the fuller text of v. 14 shows. Third, the "glory" is not evident to all who see Jesus in the Gospel, but only to those who believe in him. Fourth, seeing Jesus' "glory" is not an individual experience but a communal one, as the first person plural pronoun "we" indicates. Therefore, no spiritual or physical "glory" is expressed in this text; there is no hypostasizing of the divine *kabōd*. Neither is the experience of glory a mere cognitive or ideational one. Seeing Jesus' "glory" results from believing in him, as the one sent from God. As the manifestation of God on earth, Jesus reveals the glory of God, i. e. he makes God known among humans.

John perceives Jesus' ability to reveal God as a continuation of the prophetic tradition of Judaism. An expectation arose in Hellenistic Judaism that an eschatological prophet would appear in conjunction with the Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5–6) or would coincide with the coming of the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel (1QS 9:10–11; John 1:19). These traditions may be linked to the one about a returning prophet promised by Moses

in Deuteronomy 18:15–22. John clearly understands Jesus to be that prophet. When Philip tells Nathanael about finding Jesus, he describes him as "the one about whom Moses wrote in the law" (1:45). John's Jesus tells his critics that Moses wrote about him (5:46). Other characters in the gospel perceive Jesus to be a prophet (6:14, 7:40, 9:17), notably among them the Samaritan woman (4:19). Since the Samaritans had only the Pentateuch for their Scriptures, she must think of Jesus as the prophet that Moses predicted would return (Maloney 132; Fitzmyer 2007: 11–12, n. 24).

John does not restrict himself to a mere nominal identification of Jesus as the awaited deuteronomic prophet, but fits Jesus to the description of that prophet (Anderson 132). God told Moses how the returning prophet will speak, "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command" (Deuteronomy 18:18). John's Jesus echoes the requirement to reveal only what God has commanded him to reveal, when he says, "I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak" (John 12:49; see 3:34; 5:23–24; 8:18, 28, 38, 47). The fulfillment of this divine command realizes itself in the works of Jesus as well: "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (John 5:19; see 5:30; 6:38; 14:10, 31). Both words and works are the vehicles of God's revelation in Jesus. Moreover, since whatever the prophet says will happen or come true (18:22), so also are Jesus' words and works true: "Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him" (7:18). Implicit in the text of Deuteronomy 18:22 is the notion that God is the guarantor of what the prophet speaks: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken." Likewise, the revelation that Jesus brings is true because it comes from God. In his description of the one who comes from above and speaks heavenly things, John establishes the ground of truth in his testimony: "Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (3:33–34). John's Jesus also tells his disciples about future events, so that when they happen they will know that he is the one sent from God (2:22; 4:41; 13:19, 38; 14:29). As with the deuteronomic prophet, the one who comes from above is a true prophet because he faithfully speaks the words of God and does the works of God.

It should be noted, however, that John did not think of Jesus only as the returning prophet, for he believed he was the Messiah as well. Andrew tells his brother Simon Peter, "We have found the Messiah" (1:41). In his dialogue with Jesus, Nathanael intimates that he is the Messiah by applying three titles to him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answers him by appealing to another Messianic title, "the Son of Man" (Fitzmyer 2007: 135–136). And so, John sees Jesus as a prophetic Messiah who reveals God to the world.

In this prophetic-messianic role, Jesus is the bridge between God and humans. The image associated with the Son of Man at the end of John's first chapter is that of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12), "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51). In the original story, the ladder is the access point between heaven and earth with angels ascending

and descending upon it. Jacob confirms the meaning of the dream vision when he says, "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). John transforms the image by having the angels ascend and descend on the Son of Man, so that Jesus himself is the gate of heaven (Maloney 57). As the point of access, he is able to promise the disciples that the heavenly world will be open to them, for through him they will receive the revelatory experience of God.

Unlike Paul, John associates no heavenly journey with the believer's experience of God's revelation in Jesus. The absence of an ecstatic experience of seeing God in John's Gospel may appear to render it as non-mystical, or perhaps even anti-mystical (DeConick 2001: 109–132). Whereas it is true that John's Gospel requires that one be "born from above" (3:3) in order to see the Kingdom of God, that rebirth is initiated by baptism and maintained by faith rather than by means of a heavenly journey (Meeks 1972: 63). John's Jesus confidently proclaims, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (3:13). Nevertheless, if religious experience in John's Gospel is not ecstatic, it is no less esoteric, for only Jesus is able to disclose the heavenly realities (3:1–34) to those who know who he is, where he has come from, and where he is going. Those who wish to know the things of heaven must involve themselves in a paradoxical venture. They must be able to see into the "above" while they remain in the "below." This spatial distinction is not incidental to John's Gospel, as it pairs up with an ascent/descent pattern that is identified with Jesus as "the one who has descended from heaven." Those who apprehend this pattern contrast with Jesus' opponents in the Gospel, who fail to grasp it (Meeks 1972: 58, 63). Those who believe in Jesus are able then to see into the "above" because he is the access point, the gate of heaven, through whom the believer is united with God. No heavenly journey, dream, or visionary experience leads to that union, since, in John, "seeing" is the property of the eyes of faith. And so, like many mystical experiences, "seeing" occurs deep within the believer.

For John, an important part of the believer's faith experience is the state of mutual indwelling with God and Jesus that the verb "to abide" (*menein*) captures. In several key places in the Gospel, Jesus refers to the immanence that characterizes the union of God, Jesus, and the believer. Perhaps this indwelling is no more succinctly expressed than in John 17:21, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." Sometimes the indwelling is simply between Jesus and God (14:10–11; 16:32) and at other times between Jesus and the believer (6:56; 15:4). Then again the immanence is present in all three (14:23; 17:21). The theme is also very prominent in the letters of John (1 John 2:24; 1 John 3:9; 1 John 4:15–16).

John invokes divine immanence to promote unity among the johannine Christians. Jesus prays to the Father in 17:21, "so that they may be one as we are one." Therefore, in John union with God takes place in individual believers, as does union with Christ. It does not, however, remain as an individual experience but is also shared among the members of the johannine community. The communal aspect of divine immanence finds expression in love, where the love of God for Jesus is extended to the members of the johannine churches. Jesus prays that the believers may become completely one with another, so that the world will know that God loves the believers as God loves Jesus (17:23). In the johannine literature, the indwelling of God is the indwelling of love, for

"God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them" (1 John 4:16). So also is the mutual indwelling of God and Jesus with the believer a function of love, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (14:23). To keep Jesus' word is to keep his commandment, which is simply to "love one another as I have loved you" (15:12).

The Mysticism of Endurance and Access to the Heavenly Sanctuary in Hebrews

Hebrews is a sermon rather than a letter. It was composed most likely in Rome after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. The community for which it was written was probably suffering from social dislocation in the wake of the Jewish war with Rome and the destruction of the Temple. Its members, for the most part Gentiles, may have feared that they might suffer at the hands of the Romans, who might not have distinguished them from the Jews of Rome. This social situation may have caused some in the community to waiver in their faith. And so, the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to patient endurance during their trials and to "hold fast" to the confession of their faith.

Hebrews shows some affinity with later Jewish mystical traditions to the extent that it shares interest in things like the throne of God (1:8; 4:16; 8:1; 12:2), the heavenly sanctuary (8:2; 9:8; 9:24; 10:19; 13:11), the Temple veil (6:19; 9:3; 10:20), the divine glory (1:3; 2:7, 9, 10; 9:5) and angels (2:2, 5, 7, 9, 16; 12:22). Nevertheless, the interest Hebrews shows in these topics is not exactly the same as in those mystical traditions. Whereas the *merkabah* and *Hekhalot* traditions are more interested in describing the heavenly realm than in showing how one has access to it (see Chapter 8, this volume), access is a primary feature of Hebrews. In fact, Hebrews differs significantly from Jewish mystical texts insofar as things viewed as obstacles to God in Jewish mysticism become vehicles for access to God in Hebrews (Mackie 88–104; Koester 63). One feature of Hebrews that is similar to its counterpart in Jewish mysticism is the journey, which terminates in the presence of God; even this, however, proves to be quite different in Hebrews.

The author of Hebrews likens the spiritual journey of his audience to the pilgrimage that the people of Israel made through the wilderness on their way to see their God on Mt. Sinai (Hebrews 3:7–4:13) (Käsemann). Their destination is vividly described in Hebrews 12:18–24, where they have come to the heavenly Jerusalem (v. 22), something unlike the earthly Sinai in that it cannot be touched (v. 18); it is a spiritual reality. Unlike Israel's Sinai experience of God, marked as it was by tremendous fear (vv. 20–21), the arrival at Mount Zion is one of celebratory joy in the midst of a festal gathering of angels (v. 22), the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and the spirits of the righteous made perfect (v.23). There they see God (v. 23) and Jesus (v. 24). Whereas the Sinai experience instilled fear in the people of Israel by the specter of human and animal death (vv. 19–20; Exodus 19:12–13), the arrival at the heavenly Jerusalem is characterized by vitality. There is a myriad of angels (v. 22); Jerusalem is identified as the city of the living God (v. 22); the firstborn are those enrolled in the book of life (v. 23); the spirits of the

righteous are perfected, meaning that they bear a new form of life. Despite what the author had written earlier, that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31), the experience of God won by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ seems completely opposite of the anticipated fear associated with coming into God's presence.

The use of the perfect tense of the verb, "you have come" (v. 22), indicates that the recipients of Hebrews have already in some way achieved union with God. The verb itself (*proserchesthai*) means "to approach" or "to draw near to." In the Septuagint it has cultic connotations in the sense of "coming into the presence of a deity" and is used to describe access to God (Exodus 12:48; 16:9; 19:9; 34:32; Leviticus 9:5, 7, 22; 21:17–24). In Hebrews 4:16, its use exhorts the recipients to "approach the throne of God with boldness." In 7:25 they make the approach to God through Jesus Christ (see 10:22; 12:18). The use of this verb anticipates the ultimate realization of entering the heavenly sanctuary in the end time. So the author's realized eschatology allows the readers to enter into the joyful experience of coming to Mount Zion inceptively, in order to help them stay the course of their pilgrimage. Therefore, the experience of Mount Zion described in this text is not ecstatic and requires no heavenly journey except, perhaps, that which can be had through the mind's eye.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the case of Enoch. In 11:5 the Hebrews' author, alluding to Genesis 5:24, notes that Enoch "was taken, so that he did not experience death and he was not found, because God had taken him." In Hellenistic Jewish literature, Enoch's being taken by God is generally understood as his ascent to the heavenly realm. But Enoch's translation to heaven is ambiguous at best in Hebrews. There is no description of heavenly conveyance, just the mention of the fact that he was "taken." Neither is there any description of Enoch in the heavenly realm or any account of what he had seen there. The author of Hebrews seems to have little interest in Enoch as a heavenly traveler or visionary for that matter. He focuses instead on Enoch's faith, for Enoch is included in this chapter of the sermon for the way he exemplifies faith. It is also noted that the reason Enoch was taken up is that he had pleased God. Not only was he an example of faith in things unseen, but he also drew near to the presence of God. Without faith, in the logic of Hebrews, it is not only impossible to please God, it is also impossible to approach God: "whoever would approach him must believe that he exists" (11:6).

Enoch is not meant to provide the pattern for a heavenly journey in Hebrews because Jesus as Son and High Priest created that pattern in his sacrificial death. In 4:14 the author writes, "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession." As the "pioneer" of their salvation, he was perfected through suffering in order that he might bring them to "glory" (2:10). Elsewhere, Jesus is described as the "forerunner" on their behalf (6:20). In an even more vivid image, the author proclaims that Jesus has opened up the way into the heavenly sanctuary for the recipients through the curtain of his flesh (10:20). Here, he alludes to the Temple veil, which separated the outer sanctuary from the Holy of Holies. Commentators have noted a difference in this allusion. Whereas in the case of the Temple the veil was intended to prevent access to God, in Hebrews the curtain of Jesus' flesh actually make access to God possible (Mitchell 211, 213). The author presents this access to God as the goal of his listeners' journey, in order to sustain

those who are apparently growing weary along the way (2:1; 3:1, 12; 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 10:19; 12:12–23).

That is not to say, however, that union with God in this life is not possible in the thought of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews combines features of realized and future eschatology to impress upon his audience the full effect of what has been won for them in the sacrificial death of Christ. He was perfected through suffering, thereby becoming the source of eternal salvation for others (5:9), whom he has brought to glory (2:10). Such thinking, then, results in a close association of soteriology and eschatology in the sermon. Because Hebrews presents Jesus as the forerunner, who has opened up the way to God, the eschatological pattern established in his death and exaltation can be replicated for those who follow him (10:19–22).

Throughout the sermon, the author shows that he believes the end time has been inaugurated. He addresses his recipients in the present, which to him are "these last days" (1:2). The contrast this expression draws is with "the former times" (1:1) and the time of previous generations (3:16). It is equally evident in Hebrews, however, that the final destination of the audience has not yet been reached. The author exhorts his readers to keep moving towards the "rest" which is their goal (4:1, 6, 9, 11). He describes the location of that rest as a present reality, telling his readers that they have already come to the heavenly city (12:22) and that they are already receiving an "unshakeable kingdom" (12:28). Nevertheless, the author is equally clear that his listeners have no lasting city on earth but look forward to a future city that is to come (11:16; 13:14). Spanning these two times, the present and the future, is "today" (Hebrews 3:13–15; 4:7), the opportune time to prepare for the ultimate destination.

Language such as this challenges the readers of Hebrews to live in the present with an eye to the future. To that extent they have already "tasted" the "heavenly gift," the "goodness of the word of God," and the "powers of the age to come" (6:4–5). Similarly, they have already been sanctified by Christ's once for all sacrifice (10:14). Yet, they still have to actualize the "full assurance of hope to the very end" (6:11) and they must wait for Christ to return in order to save them (9:29). Practically speaking, this means the community of Hebrews lives in an interim period, a time when not all the enemies of Christ have been subjected to him (10:13) and in which the fullness of his salvation has yet to be received (10:37–39) (Mitchell 21–23).

How are the recipients of Hebrews to live in union with God during the interim? The author exhorts them to obedience and fidelity. They must "hold fast" to their confession (3:6; 4:14; 10:19–22), to approach God with confidence (4:16; 10:19, 22) and to avoid sin (6:4–8; 12:14–17, 25–29; 10:26–31). This requires a measure of transcendence to join oneself to the ultimate reality that Hebrews believes its recipients will share. It requires endurance as well to be able to stay the course on the journey yet to be complete. And so Hebrews appears to enjoin upon its readers a mysticism of endurance, in and through which union with the divine in the present will culminate in eternal life.

Note

1   Unless otherwise noted all English translations of biblical texts are taken from The New Revised Standard Version.

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CHAPTER 8

The Judaean–Jewish Contexts of Early Christian Mysticism

Ori Z Soltes

In considering the role of Jewish thought within early Christian mysticism, one first needs to clarify two issues: what is mysticism in relation to religion in general, and what are Judaism and Christianity in relationship to each other and to the Judaean tradition from which they both emerged? A common mistake is to assume that the Judaean and Jewish traditions are synonymous, and that Christianity derived subsequently from Judaism. I argue instead that it is important to understand how both Judaism and Christianity derive, as siblings, from a common Judaean parent. Toward that end, I will first consider Judaean material, in particular the Enoch literature, that would come to influence both early Jewish mysticism and early Christian mysticism. I will then discuss the emergence of early Jewish mysticism during the first three centuries of the common era, focusing in particular on early, pre-kabbalistic, *Merkavah* mysticism. Finally, I will turn to early Christian mysticism and trace the evolving interchange between it and early Jewish mysticism. Some preliminary reflections, however, may help guide this discussion.

Religion and Mysticism

Religion exists to address, explore, and explain divinity. The need to do this derives from the belief that divinity is something beyond and greater than ourselves that has created, and has the concomitant power to destroy, us: to help or harm, further or hinder, bless or curse us. Religion's purpose is to help assure that human behavior conforms to what divinity would have from us so that we are blessed rather than cursed.

Mysticism is, as it were, a subset of religion. The mystic believes that within God there is a hiddenmost, innermost recess – a *mysterion* (from the Greek root *myst-*, meaning "close," or by extension, "hide") – and that, ultimately, everyday religion only manages to access the exterior aspect of God. The mystic seeks to merge with God's

innermost being and believes that, by some prescribed esoteric method, this is possible – a paradox, since the merging of human and divine (by definition, irreconciliably antithetical states of being) is logically impossible.

Part of the solution to that paradox is addressed by the notion that the mystic must entirely lose him/herself in order to merge with God – to be filled with God's innermost Being. That solution, however, yields another complication: the challenge of reclaiming the self in order to "return" to an everyday state of being. Part of the meaning of this is that the mystic's intention cannot be to achieve the enlightenment deriving from the mystical process for his/her own benefit – for that would mean that s/he remains too *self*-ish – but for the benefit of the community of which s/he is part.

One might say that the mystic in the Jewish and Christian traditions seeks to achieve through method what prophets once achieved through merely being born to it: prophets are chosen by God to be the conduits of divine instruction to their communities, while mystics seek God. In common parlance, the term to describe the achievement of that condition is ecstasy, derived from Greek roots meaning "out of" (*ek*) [one's state of] standing (*stasis*). But in the Jewish and Christian traditions, a bit of God is understood to be in each of us, based on Genesis 2:7: "the Lord God formed man (*adam*) of the dust of the ground (*adamah*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath (*n'shama*; Greek: *psyche*; Latin: *anima*) of life; and man became a living soul [i.e. became *animate*]." Thus the mystic seeking the divine *mysterion* also understands that the process of gaining access might be one of *en-stasis* (digging deeply into the – selfless – self) as much as *ek-stasis* (soaring out beyond the self).

Judaeanism, Judaism, and Christianity

What is the historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity and their common parent, Judaeanism? This issue is complicated by the fact that none of the languages in use during the period (c. 70–135 CE) when Judaism and Christianity emerged distinguish "Judaean" from "Jew" or "Jewish." Thus Hebrew "*yehoodee*," Aramaic "*yehooday*," Greek "*iudaios*," and Latin "*iudaeus*" – to refer to the most obvious languages of the eastern Mediterranean during the period of the late Roman Republic and early Empire – all have two possible translations into English.

As a practical matter, this conceptual confusion would have consequences for outsiders – particularly for the pagan polytheistic Roman administration increasingly involved in Judaea and its affairs and in the countries around Judaea from the time of Pompey (63 BCE) forward – much as it has consequences for our own understanding of those affairs and of the issue before us. Thus an important matter to resolve is when and why to use the terms Judaean and Jewish (and Christian) in referring to groups in that era and in describing their patterns of culture, religion and general thought.

What today we think of as Judaism took shape, in part, as Christianity was emerging. The Hebrew Bible, the literary centerpiece that governs Jewish life, was not canonized until 140 CE. That centerpiece was and remains subject to two rather different bodies of interpretive literature – the Midrash and the Talmud – both of which have functioned to shape the practical meanings of the Hebrew Bible across most of the Jewish world.

These texts began as an oral tradition in the Judaean period, perhaps as far back as the third century BCE, but did not assume a definitive written form until the second or even third century CE. Judaism encompasses a roster of life-cycle events, patterns of daily prayer and of monthly and annual community celebrations, together with customs that are part of keeping the Sabbath and holidays. Extensive dispersion throughout history has made for myriad variations on these basic aspects of Jewish life.

To a certain degree, these features of Judaism were taking shape in reaction against parallel developments in what was becoming Christianity, which eventually extended over a contiguous area. There was a parallel, overlapping, albeit different sense of what constitutes the Bible, a parallel but different sense of lifecycle and calendrical celebrations, not to mention different prayers and prayer cycles, a different day as the Sabbath and a different gastronomy. Whereas Judaism eschewed the notion of God in human form, the early adherents of Christianity began to move toward a triune understanding of God that, as one of its three co-substantial aspects, assumed human form for salvational purposes.

These differences notwithstanding, the two siblings were both offspring of the Israelite–Judaean parent, shaping themselves not only vis-a-vis each other but as distinct responses to – whether direct continuations of or rebellions against – that parental tradition. Thus, for instance, the oral discussions that began in the Judaean period but which eventuated as an extensive written Talmud and Midrash in the Jewish tradition were ultimately eschewed by the emerging Christian tradition which, in contrast to this rabbinic literature, developed what became an extensive Patristic religious and theological literature.

What this means in practical definitional terms is that what we call and would recognize as Judaism and Christianity were only beginning to take shape in the late first and early second centuries, and that the appropriate term, in English, for the religious tradition that precedes this time period is "Judaean." What this means for our discussion is that a mystical aspect of the religious tradition under discussion from, say, the second century BCE, should also be referred to as "Judaean," not as "Jewish," although all too commonly the latter term is used rather than the former.

Emerging Mysticism in Late Second Temple Judaea: Toward the Enoch Literature

The late Judaean community (from c. 150 BCE through the late first century CE) was a community in a good deal of conflict with itself. Virtually from the time of the return from Babylonian exile under Achaemenid Persian patronage and the building of the Second Temple (538–515 BCE), Judaeans debated the nature of God and whether God is the God of everyone or only of the Judaeans; they also debated the nature of proper leadership (is it more distinctly political, descended from the House of David; or more purely spiritual, descended from Tzadok, the High Priest in Solomon's Temple?). Add to this the usual societal conflicts between urban and rural communities, rich and poor, the better educated and the less educated, and it is no surprise that the Judaean community was intensely schismatic. Spiritual perspective and political being interwove

each other within the developing identities of groups known as Sadducees and Phari-sees. As the generations rolled forward, the situation worsened rather than improved. In the aftermath of the successful Hasmonean-led revolt against the Seleucids (168–165 BCE), Judaea achieved full political independence for the first time in more than four centuries – but from the viewpoint of many, both the High Priesthood and the political leadership, soon hereditary, were inherently corrupt insofar as the Hasmone-ans were *neither* Tzadokite nor Davidic in descent.

Thus the long-held hopes for a divinely anointed (*mashiah* in Hebrew; *christos* in Greek) leadership that would restore what had come to be seen retrospectively as a Davidic Golden Age were dashed. Not surprisingly, one or more groups withdrew entirely from the mainstream communities of Judaea and established themselves in remote locations – for instance, in sites like that by the northwest coast of the Dead Sea that came subsequently to be referred to as Qumran. These communities organized themselves according to strict spiritual rules that they believed would assure their sur-vival into a New Age when the inevitable apocalypse, due very soon, arrived. They transcribed books from the evolving biblical canon and wrote their own, including those that focused on that apocalypse.

Late Second Temple literature – Judaean literature, not Jewish literature – included, not surprisingly, a *large* volume of apocalyptic works. From the Greek preposition "away" (*apo*) and verb "to bury/hide" (*kalyptein*) the term associated with these texts reflected the notion that they offered secret, hidden information accessible only to authors in intimate contact with God's hiddenmost Being. One can see this as a starting point for what we could term Late Judaean mysticism – mysticism practiced from c. 150 BCE through the late first century CE – that was characterized by the conviction that there is a deep, hidden recess of Godness that everyday Judaeanism doesn't access, and by the goal of achieving that access in order to benefit the community. Apocalyptic works that might be associated with this were directed to an audience of devotees from within a Judaean community that was not only schismatic but also increasingly dispersed. For Judaeans resided both within Judaea and elsewhere: many had never returned from Babylonia, and others had settled elsewhere, from Antioch to Alexan-dria, and further afield, from Athens to Rome.

Late Second Temple mystical literature – Judaean (to repeat), not Jewish mystical literature – therefore evolved within a context very much in flux with regard to what texts should properly be understood as divinely inspired. Those texts agreed by the mainstream leadership to have been prophetically shaped would end up as part of the biblical canon, but mystics were not necessarily in tune with that leadership, and many were more likely to look beyond the developing canon for *any* works that might offer clues to God's innermost Being and how to achieve intimate contact with It.

Thus, on the one hand, there were texts within the eventual canons of both Judaism and Christianity offering passages that stand out in being construable as mystical even within the context of accepted prophetic writing. Preeminent among such passages is Isaiah 6:1, in which the prophet finds himself transported into the most ethereal of realms, before the very throne of God around which seraphim are swirling while inton-ing words of praise. The prophet's response is to fear of his inadequacies "who am of unclean mouth and impure lips." So, too, the first chapter of Ezekiel extends beyond

"normative" prophetic vision. In it the prophet – out beyond the city, across the river, in the wilderness – sees an extraordinary entity, a kind of icy, sapphire throne/chariot, moving yet not moving on wheels made of eyes surmounted by four winged creatures each of which has four faces: those of a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a man, in each of the four directions. Placed upon and within this entity – called *merkavah* in Hebrew – is an extraordinary anthropomorph, its lower parts and its upper parts ringed with fire. The prophet concludes his description of this vision by asserting that he has seen "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." In other words, he cannot have seen what cannot be seen (an invisible God) but by way of a triple circumlocution has defied reasonable logic and offered the paradox of not seeing and seeing the God that then addressed him, initiating his years of prophesying.

On the other hand, certain works that never made it into either the Jewish or the Christian canons, such as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* or the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, might have attracted Judaean mystics. Moreover, in searching for guides and clues, Judaean mystics would have looked at still other works – even those authored outside the community, in the pagan Greco-Roman world. The Pythagorean school of thought, for instance, with its emphasis on number and numbers as a starting point for reality – numbers as an abstract perfection within an imperfect, concrete world – attracted Judaean mystics.

Among the non-canonical but Judaean-authored books that appeared sometime during the late Second Temple period was the first in a series of works purported to be written by Enoch. Enoch was of critical importance to Judaean mystical thought and hence to both early Jewish and early Christian mysticism. He is mentioned in Genesis 5:21–24, in the genealogy that carries the narrative from Adam to Noah. Whereas for everyone else in that long list of figures, the litany offers "X lived Y years and begat Z and lived Y years and died," for Enoch we read that, after he begat Methusaleh, he "walked with God" (v. 22). This phrase repeats again, when, instead of his having died, the text informs us (v. 24) that "he was not; for God took him." Enoch also appears in the New Testament, mentioned as part of a genealogical progression in Luke 3:37; and in Hebrews 11:5, which offers an apparent gloss on Genesis 5:22–24: "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God." In Jude 1:14–15, one finds what amounts to a direct quote from 1 Enoch 1:9, suggesting that by the time this epistle was written, 1 Enoch was in circulation.

Speculation on the meaning of the verses in Genesis 5 resulted in an entire literature asserting that Enoch was taken up to heaven – carried through seven lower heavenly levels and then through three uppermost levels; he was carried even beyond where the uppermost of the angels dwell – to the hiddenmost divine precinct. There he had an audience with God in which he learned details regarding the beginning and the end of time, and was instructed to return to earth to share with his children the knowledge that he received, so that their lives might thereafter be guided toward goodness and divine blessing – before he, Enoch, returned permanently to God's realm.

In the end at least three versions of this account – in Ethiopic, Slavonic, and Hebrew – have survived to our own time, none of which ended up within the Jewish or Christian biblical canons.[1] But for Judaean mystics and hence for both their Jewish and their

Christian successors, the *Enoch* literature offered an important starting point for specu-
lation about how to gain access to the divine *mysterion* and about what information
would be derived from that access and to what community-benefiting use it might be
put. Indeed, Gershom Scholem, pre-eminent twentieth-century scholar of Jewish mys-
ticism, asserts that "the main subjects of the later *Merkavah* mysticism [within the
Jewish tradition] already occupy a central position in the older esoteric literature, best
represented by the Book of Enoch" (43). In particular the description of God's throne
found in 1 Enoch 14 connects the imagery of Ezekiel 1 and the *Merkavah* tradition that
I will discuss shortly.

The three versions of Enoch offer variations, and the time periods of their respective
composition ranges as well. These variations and time period differences are important
for the Judaean versus Jewish/Christian issue. Thus the earliest – the aforementioned
1 Enoch – is believed to date from c. 300 BCE to 100 CE, when the Temple still stood – i.e.
the late Judaean period. The second may date from c. 100 CE – i.e. the early Jewish-
Christian period. The third version, although it purports to be second century, may date
from as late as the fourth, or even the fifth century CE – making it part of what may
definitively be called non-canonical Jewish (or Christian) literature.

Most intriguing, from a mystic's perspective, is this last, the Hebrew-language
version, in which Enoch, rather than being anointed with oil by God while within the
mysterion (as in the Ethiopic and Slavonic versions), is transformed as he journeys
upward, from a being of flesh and blood to one of fire. So, too, his name changes, from
Enoch (in Hebrew: *Hanoch*, meaning "educator") to Metatron. There has been consider-
able debate as to the source and meaning of this name, but either of two among the
several possibilities is most likely and most relevant to our discussion. One is that it
derives from the Hebrew root "*n-t-r*," meaning "to look over" or "to observe." According
to this interpretation, Enoch/Metatron is shown the totality of reality, from begin-
ning to end; he observes/looks over it all. The other strong possibility is that Metatron
derives from the Greek "*meta ton tronon*," meaning "beyond the throne." According
to this interpretation, Enoch/Metatron transcends all of the angels and, in the para-
doxic, circumlocutionary thinking that underlies this work and the emerging mystical
tradition for which it is a foundational text, he comes closer to God's innermost Being
than anyone ever has, going beyond the Name of God, or the Throne of God (which
in Ezekiel 1 *merely* bears the *likeness* of the *appearance* of the *Glory* of God). Indeed,
the mystical tradition focusing on Enoch will refer to him, among other things, as the
"Officer of the Countenance" ("*Sar HaPanim*") to indicate his extreme proximity to God's
Essence.

The Emergence of the Early Jewish Mystical Tradition

The Hebrew-language version of Enoch carries us from Judaean to Jewish mysticism.
Some scholars regard it as an inspiration for, and others as one of the principal texts
of, the early Jewish mystical tradition called *Merkavah* which, preceding the more famil-
iar Kabbalistic period, takes its name from the vision described in Ezekiel 1. The precise
beginning point of and earliest works within *Merkavah* mysticism remain a subject

of scholarly debate. *Merkavah* emphasized the transcendent, distant, difficult-to-access aspect of God into whose *mysterion* very few have gained entry.

Beyond offering an example of such transcendence, or *ekstasis*, Enoch 3 serves another important purpose. It reminds the reader of the intense danger of the mystical enterprise: one ill-equipped for it might simply be burned to a crisp. This idea, of the dangers inherent in the mystical process, is expressed within the Talmud itself, in a passage that derives from the early Jewish (as opposed to Judaean) period. The passage expresses the Jewish leadership's concern that mystical practitioners might endanger both themselves and the very community that they sought to benefit.

The warning is expressed in an allegory. Four leading early-second-century rabbis enter the *Pardes*. A Hebrew word based on the same Persian word that gives us (by way of Greek and then Latin renderings of the Persian word, *para deshu*) "paradise," *pardes* means "garden" in the Hebrew of antiquity, and is understood to refer allegorically to the garden of mystical speculation. It can be a very treacherous garden: "Ben Azzai looked and died; Ben Zoma looked and went mad; *Aher* [Elisha Ben Abuya] cut the shoots [ie, apostasized]; only Akiva entered in peace and departed in peace" (Tosefta, *Hagiga* 14b). Thus the danger of engaging in mystical speculation is considerable: one might die, go mad, or apostasize. In the intense spiritual competition among Judaism, Christianity, and diverse forms of paganism, this last danger – of relinquishing a proper relationship with God for an improper one – was deemed to be as profound as death or insanity. And even where the greatest of rabbinic leaders are concerned, only one in four survived the mystical experience intact. How much less would be the possibility of survival for ordinary people not schooled in the kind of paradox-filled thinking that dominates even mainstream rabbinic thought.

By the time this sort of concern was being expressed in written form, we are (to repeat) firmly into the period (the mid-second century CE or later) of early Judaism and Christianity). The worry regarding apostasy, which in the late Judaean period would have referred to paganism, referred increasingly to Christianity from the Jewish perspective, and to Judaism from the Christian perspective. As much as the two sibling traditions were taking increasingly divergent spiritual paths – most obviously separated by the evolving belief of the one group that God assumed human form as Jesus of Nazareth and by the other group that God never did or would assume any sort of physical form at all – they were both informed by parallel spiritual issues and were mutually influenced by each other.

The developing Jewish mystical tradition, with its steadfast conviction that God is utterly without physical form, would present an obvious double paradox to those engaged in its practices and aspirations. How can one speak of a divine *mysterion* – a hiddenmost core to God – which would imply two elements or aspects, an inner aspect and an outer aspect, for an emphatically and unequivocally singular, substanceless God? One can see how the worry regarding apostasy into Christianity with its triune God concept might develop. Moreover, how in any case could it be possible to merge with that purely metaphysical and absolutely singular God that is so utterly other than what we are, who are physical and made up of diverse parts?

The beginning of an answer was to be found, as all answers are found – albeit paradoxically – in the text of God's word, the Hebrew Bible, but particularly in the Torah.

For instance, in Exodus 3:13–14, having received a charge from the voice of God speaking out of the Burning Bush, Moses inquires: "[when the Israelites] say to me 'What is His Name? What shall I say to them?' And God said unto Moses, 'I Am That I Am . . . I Am has sent Me unto you' " God is not being coy with Moses but is responding in accordance with the understanding common at that time that a name conveys the essence of its bearer. But God's essence is *Essence – Being* – itself. The response conveys the truth that a God of Being cannot be captured – defined – in the way that other names capture and convey the primary attribute(s) of their bearers.

On the one hand, the fact that the Hebrew verb "to be" has no real present tense but offers a perfective and imperfective and that God's response, in the imperfective, is really a present-future (I am/will be that I am/will be) rather than a perfective/past tense, underscores the timeless formlessness of God. On the other hand, it draws attention to the idea that the Name of God offers access to an understanding of what God is: *Isness* itself. But what *is* Isness, Essence, Being itself?

For the Jewish mystic, the fact that God's Name, *YHVH*, built on the root for "be," is not clearly pronounceable – it is, rather, ineffable – leads to the conviction that access to the divine *mysterion* may be through intimate knowledge of that unknowable Name (for if it is ineffable, it is unknowable in the standard sense of that adjective). Traditional Judaism, from antiquity to the present, has maintained that the actual mode of articulating God's Name *was* known during the prophetic era and in its aftermath, the Judaean Second Temple era – but only to prophets and thereafter only to the High Priest in the Temple. Thus the goal of the Jewish mystic who seeks oneness with the One God may be expressed as seeking to unravel God's ineffable, unknowable Name – to gain prophetic, High Priestly knowledge.

As Jewish mysticism began to develop, not surprisingly, the same Rabbi Akiva (c. 50–135 CE) who was the only rabbi to survive the *pardes* experience intact was singled out as one who, in the post-Temple Jewish world, attained this knowledge. A story is told (Oxford MS 1531 f. 52a), in a *Merkavah* tract sometimes called *Heikhalot Zutratai* "Lesser Chambers" – referring to the *Merkavah* mystical notion that the Divine realm is divided into seven lesser (*zutratai*) and three greater (*rabbatai*) levels. The story offers Akiva's account to Rabbi Ishmael of having moved through seven different states: from being pious (*hassid*), pure (*tahor*), straight/proper (*yashar*), perfect[ly simple in faith] (*tameem*), sanctified (*m'koodash*), to speaking sanctities (*m'daber k'dooshah*), to being filled with fear and trembling (*yara oopahad*) – and then suddenly finding himself grasping the Expounded Name of God (*haShem haM'forash*).

We might note three issues here. First, the number sequence – seven – is not accidental. It relates not only to that number within the Hebrew Bible, both in the creation story and in the commandment to keep the Sabbath as a day apart, but also to the importance of that number in the larger world of antiquity. Second, if any of the conditions to which Akiva refers were understood in an everyday sense we would have to pronounce him a narcissist; but if that were so he could not have succeeded in grasping God's Name. We therefore have to understand these conditions as devoid of ego and self – which is what being truly pious, pure, proper and perfect is all about. Third, he offers no explicit statement regarding *how* he managed the feat of accessing the secret Name to which he refers.

The hidden information regarding God's hiddenness buried within God's Ineffable Name is part of the paradoxic, circumlocutionary approach to accessing the inaccessible yet accessible *mysterion*. That approach eventually came to include an extensive series of modes of *expressing* the Name. Thus the four-lettered Name (*YHVH*) – referred to in the much later, medieval vocabulary as the *Tetragrammaton* – became only one way of referring to God. Later, "classical" Jewish mysticism – *Kabbalah*, beginning to emerge out of *Merkavah* by the eleventh century – would shape an endless series of modes of expressing and exploring the *Shem HaM'forash* through different combinations of words, letters and/or numbers.

Since every letter in Hebrew has a numerical value, numbers are particularly rich in possibility with regard to gaining access to the *mysterion*. This would apply particularly to numbers like "four" (both the number of letters in the *Tetragrammaton* and the number of directions in our human reality) or seven (the number of perfection and completion that the creation cycle of Genesis inherited from the Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions, and also the number associated with Akiva's account of grasping the Ineffable Name).

The notion of the importance of certain numbers and of words and names with meanings hidden within their numerological shapes – i.e. by adding up the numerical values of a particular word or phrase the mystic arrives at some number that offers hidden significance – is part of the *Merkavah* sense of God's ineffable distance. It is connected to the sense that everything we say about the God whose *mysterion* we seek – whose inaccessible *mysterion* may, paradoxically, be accessed – can only be said in some circumlocutionary manner, rather than directly.

So, too, the issue of circumlocution with regard to accessing the divine *mysterion* applied not only to God's name but also to concepts about God expressed in the Enoch literature and the Judaean and early Jewish mystical traditions that looked toward that literature as a source of information. Thus Enoch, once he achieved access to God beyond even where the angels accede (and in the Hebrew version, was renamed Metatron), was called (among other things) *Sar HaPAnim*: "Officer of the Countenance," as we have noted. He who gained access received hidden knowledge as well as instruction regarding how to make use of that knowledge to benefit others, and was then sent back to accomplish this – is not *presumptively* spoken of as having achieved oneness with *God*, even as he *is* spoken of thusly. For God's countenance is and is not the *same* as God – just as God's Name is and is not the same as God.

The Problem of Creation and the First Formal Jewish Mystical Text

While the central period of *Merkavah* mysticism was the fifth through the eighth centuries CE, there is disagreement, to repeat, as to exactly when, and with which texts, it began. Is Enoch 3 part of it? Enoch 3 may be seen to offer one obvious and important element in early Jewish mysticism, as we have seen: that of describing an ascent to the *mysterion*. Other fragmentary texts such as that describing Rabbi Akiva's seven-part ascent – or another delineating Rabbi Ishmael's own ascent, called *Heikhalot Rabbatai* ("Greater Chambers/Palaces") – are typically regarded as part of the *Merkavah*

tradition, but their precise date – anywhere from mid-second to fifth century CE – is unclear. The same is true of a work, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* ("Account of the Throne/ Chariot") that focuses on unraveling the hidden information in Ezekiel 1 through hymns recited during the process of ascent through the *heikhalot*. All of these texts either focus on the *heikhalot* or describe passage through them into the depths of the *mysterion*. But a fundamental question apparently also raised early on within the Jewish mystical tradition was how a singular, intangible God, inaccessible to the senses and intellect, created a world that is multifarious, tangible and accessed through the senses and intellect. The implication was that, if one were to truly understand the process of creation, then by meditating on the reversal of that process one could work one's way "back" to the divine *mysterion*.

Of course, the Torah offered to the traditional Jew everything one could wish to know about anything, including the process of creation. Genesis 1 and 2 give a full account of creation – but without a scintilla of the information necessary to truly understand the process. What does the pre-creation *Tohu VaVohu* ("absolute is-ness") referenced in verse 2 actually mean? How are we to understand, when "God said, 'let there be light' . . ." *how* exactly God *said* – with what sort of physical oral instruments, given the non-physicality of God? In short, how did the sort of God articulated in Judaism create a universe that seems to be utterly the opposite of that God?

The first formal, systematic text that might be associated with the beginnings of the Jewish mystical attempts to answer this question is the *Sepher Yetzirah.* It is ascribed by that tradition to Rabbi Akiva (although a subset tradition suggests that it was revealed to Abraham and transmitted orally for two millennia until Akiva first wrote it down – and some scholars date it to as late as the seventh century, in which case it would fall outside *early Merkavah* literature). If the *Sepher Yetzirah* is indeed a second-century work, then it offers a beginning point for the first phase of the formal Jewish mystical tradition, building on the sorts of texts that emerged in the Judaean and early Jewish periods that were not, however, yet organized into the formalized *Merkavah* system.

Relatively short (six brief chapters), the *Sepher*, in a nutshell, explains creation this way: that God effected it through 32 conduits – the 10 numbers and the 22 consonantal sound/letters of the Hebrew alphabet. What leads to this supposition (aside from the belief that the text originates with God Itself)? Sound/letters and numbers stand on the border between abstract and concrete. We use the former to shape the words with which we, unique among the God-created species, access the world; we grasp concrete mundane reality by labeling its constituent parts and by referencing and addressing those parts with those labels. Numbers are also essential to our functioning as humans in the world; in the most mundane aspects of everyday life we distinguish two cups of sugar from four and five pennies from ten. Yet numbers and sound/letters are themselves abstractions. We can distinguish four fingers from seven fingers but cannot put our finger on "*four*ness" or "*seven*ness" without the objects to which we relate them. We cannot define "*b*ness" or "*f*ness," however clear each of these sounds and their (arbitrarily assigned) "names" are to our grasping the concrete world.

So there is an inherent logic in the notion set forth in this text, filled as it is with diverse explorations and explanations of the fundamental creation process. But we are reminded of the circumlocutionary tradition whereby Akiva grasped "the expounded/

expanded ineffable *Name*"; in which, looking further backwards, Enoch/Metatron is the "Officer of the *Countenance*"; and however close one gets to the absolute divine *mysterion*, there is always somehow a veil (*pargod*), however infinitesimally thin, separating the mystic from that hidden recess of God.

In Hebrew, there are several different words that might be used for "creation." "*Asiyah*" is the broadest term, which may translate as "making." "*Yetzirah*" refers to the kind of creative process in which an artist or craftsperson engages: s/he takes clay and shapes a pot, or stone and shapes a statue. "*Briyah*" is the term used to refer uniquely to divine creation – *creatio ex nihilo*; the shaping of our reality from nothing but *is*ness. Thus the name of the *Sepher Yetzirah* indicates that in spite of presenting a description of divine creation it doesn't actually presume to *do* so – like the mystic who believes that intimate mergence with the divine *mysterion* is possible yet does not presume that it is.

The paradox of achieving/not achieving oneness with the accessible/inaccessible *mysterion*, like that of explaining/not explaining Creation, is central to *Merkavah* thought. *Merkavah* mystics referred to themselves as *yordei merkavah*: "descenders of the throne/chariot." This turn of phrase is conceptually cognate with the paradox of *ekstasis*/*enstasis* – that getting out of one's self can be getting into one's self. One might expect that practitioners would be called *ascenders*, not *descenders*, but there are at least three possible explanations for the turn of phrase as it exists. First, it could refer to the humility necessary for the mystical process to succeed: to ascend one must descend. Second, it could refer to the notion that, when the process succeeds it does so because, in the end, God *descends* to meet the ascending aspiration of the mystic, pulling him/her into the *mysterion*. And third, it could reflect the idea that directional concepts are pointless in the realm of the Divine, where up, down, east, west, north, south, inward, outward have no reality: to descend is to ascend and vice versa.

The heart of *Merkavah* mysticism is a delineation of the *heikhalot* – the "chambers" that define the heavenly realm. One can recognize an inspiration from the Enoch literature, culminating with Enoch 3 (which is also a possible *example* of *Merkavah* literature). Within this delineation is a sense of the importance of numbers, particularly 10 and some of its subsets, 7 and 3, from the *Sepher Yetzirah*. For, to repeat, the *Heikhalot* literature delineates 7 lower chambers (*heikhalot zutratai*) – which may also be understood as the chambers through which Rabbi Akiva traveled toward the *Shem HaMforash* – and 3 uppermost chambers (*heikhalot rabbatai*) (through which, in another work, Rabbi Ishmael traveled, toward the throne of heaven).

It is noteworthy in both the *Merkavah*/*Heikhalot* literature and in Jewish mysticism in general that the main focus, with rare exceptions, was on descriptions either of the creative process or of the divine realm, as opposed to descriptions of a means and method of gaining access to that realm.

Judaean and Early Jewish Mysticism Within and Not Within Early Christian Mysticism

There are obvious differences between early Judaism and Christianity where mystical sensibilities are concerned. Christianity's main narrative is inherently mystical: the

transformation of God as human through the agency of a Virgin Birth – the Word become flesh – defies reason and logic; the believer embraces the mystery through faith. Early Judaism rejected this mystery, so the idea of human mergence with Divine *mysterion* is inherently paradoxical only for Jewish mystics. Elements that emerged as essential to Jewish mysticism – e.g., focusing on the importance of the Hebrew language and the possibilities that it offers for numerological explorations of the divine texts – did not become a part of Christian mysticism, in part because Christianity's narrative was not defined by Hebrew and in part because it was not defined by *any* particular language.

By the time Judaism and Christianity were solidly distinguishable from each other – some time between the very end of the first century and the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132–135 – a key issue separating them was the interpretive matter of what texts constitute that primary narrative called "Bible."[2] Nonetheless, in sharing one group of them – the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament canon – the two emerging traditions, particularly in their mystical modes, shared a common interest in at least some texts, since their mystics were more willing than their "mainstream" counterparts to look outside the confines of canon for guidance regarding access to the *mysterion*.

Important contributors to the early Christian mystical tradition, from Origen (184/5–253/4) in his *Commentary on Song of Songs*, prol. 1.7 (see Chapters 10 and 12, this volume) to Saint Augustine (354–430) in his *Commentary on Psalm 42* (see Chapter 14, this volume), concentrated part of their attention on Hebrew biblical texts, such as the beginning of Genesis, Ezekiel 1 and 40 (the Vision of the New Temple), Psalms, and the Song of Songs. This, however, did not mean that they were influenced by Jewish thought, much less by Jewish mystical thought. As much as the Old Testament may be a "mere" prelude to the New Testament for Christianity – and even if the Apostles would ultimately receive a more sustained focus from Christian mystics than Israelite prophets – it was still understood as part of what was taking shape as the Christian Bible, so some focus on it would be expected.

Moreover, the focus was angled differently. Just as passages in Genesis and Isaiah were read and interpreted differently by Jews and Christians in general, so Ezekiel's description of the Temple or the relationship between Lover and Beloved in the Song of Songs as an allegory of that between Christ and the mystic's soul were read through distinctly Christian eyes by Origen. Although the *Shi'ur Komah* ("Measurement of the Body" of God), paradoxically "seen" by descenders at the climax of their ascent, might be understood as rooted in a mystical discussion of Song of Songs, the latter is far less a focus in early Jewish than in Christian mysticism. The love tonalities of such poetry separated it from the primary emphasis of *Merkavah* mysticism on the *transcendent, awesome* nature of God. Only much later, with the development of kabbalistic mysticism in the eleventh century, would an emphasis on God's *loving immanence* evolve – but even then, Song of Songs did not become a primary textual focus.

There are also texts beyond the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament that the two early mystical traditions shared as a focus, such as the Enoch texts. But the dating of 1 Enoch would make it part of the late Judaean period, not Jewish or Christian per se (and early enough to be referenced in the New Testament, as we have seen). The time of 2 Enoch appears to be on the cusp of the Judaean-Jewish/Christian transformation, and, depend-

ing upon the point at which one recognizes the beginning of the *Merkavah* period, arguably offers part of the early *Heikhalot* material. Some, such as Orlov (148), have argued that it is a bridge text between the apocalyptic material to which 1 Enoch belongs and the Jewish mystical tradition.

This is in part because of the similarity of its narrative to that of 3 Enoch and in particular to the issue of Enoch's name-change to Metatron and subsequent other titles (such as *Sar haPanim*). But 3 Enoch's late date (fourth to fifth century CE), while it can either be described as an influence on or as a part of *Merkavah*/*Heikhalot* mysticism, is less apparently a presence in early Christian mysticism than 1 Enoch and 2 Enoch. In short, one cannot simply refer to the Enoch material as exemplifying the influence of Jewish on Christian mystical writing.

The Patristic writings contain a number of references to forms of the *Tetragrammaton* – mostly in Greek or Latin. But that usage among a few early Christian thinkers, mystical and otherwise, seems merely to reflect an awareness of its presence within the Hebrew Bible and a desire either to continue or to adapt its use. The sort of obsessive focus on it (involving plays with letter and number combinations) that emerged and evolved within Jewish mysticism is nowhere in evidence on the Christian side of the spiritual fence.

Perhaps this is because of the primary divide between the two traditions regarding the nature of God. The Jewish mystic required an abstract instrument in seeking access to an emphatically non-physical God. For the Christian mystic, the physicality of God yielded physical means of accessing the *mysterion*. Thus martyrdom was available (and embraced by figures like Origen), as long as Christianity was persecuted by the Roman administration as politically subversive; later, intense asceticism offered itself after Christianity became hegemonic across the empire. In both martyrdom and asceticism/monasticism, the point was to disconnect one's soul from physical need in order to achieve *enstasis*/*ekstasis* with the divine Source of all souls. While Rabbi Akiva himself is said to have been martyred by the Romans and martyrdom would over the centuries prove all too common in Jewish history, asceticism, per se, and certainly monasticism, rarely achieved a significant place within Jewish mysticism, and clearly not in its earliest phase.

Interestingly, some Jewish scholars (Boyarin and Segal) consider St. Paul's accounts of his conversion and his ascent to the heavens as the first first-person *Merkavah* account – predating Akiva's by several generations. Others, such as Timothy Churchill, assert that the Damascus Road experience does not fit the *Merkavah* pattern – and in any case, it would constitute a Judaean, pre-Jewish, pre-Christian account.

More fundamentally, the world of which Judaeanism, early Judaism and early Christianity were all part was enormously syncretistic. It is as likely that Jewish mysticism was influenced by early Christian mysticism as the other way around and practitioners of both emerging mystical traditions were aware of paganism, less threatened by it than were their more mainstream co-religionists, and influenced by it. There are Hebrew texts such as the *Sefer HaRazim* (*Book of Secrets*), purporting to be a transmission originating in the time of Noah, and filled with pagan elements. Conversely, the pagan *Greek Magical Papyrae* are overrun with obvious Jewish *and* Christian elements. These two texts, among others, bring up another definitional question: where does mysticism

leave off and magic pick up, and vice versa, in emerging Judaism and Christianity? But that is another question for another time and place.

Notes

1   With one exception: 1 Enoch, written in Ge'ez (Ethiopic) is considered part of the canon in the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches.
2   I am using the Bar Kokhba Revolt as a marker since it offers the first moment when it is clear to us that the Roman authorities were able to distinguish Christians from Jews: in the aftermath of the revolt against Roman political control in which Jewish Judaeans *did* but Christian Judaeans apparently did *not* participate, the Emperor Hadrian passed anti-Jewish legislation that excluded Christians.

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CHAPTER 9

"Mysticism" in the Pre-Nicene Era?

Bogdan G. Bucur

Despite the venerable usage of the noun "mystery" and of the adjective "mystical" in early Christianity, in reference to the church ritual, to the sacraments, to the interpretation of Scripture, to the angels, to the Christian life of prayer, etc., the term "mysticism" is not very felicitous. As has been noted (Louth; Fitschen), it relies on the unproblematized assumption of "mysticism" as a universal category applicable to any number of Christian or non-Christian phenomena. The noun "mystique" appeared in seventeenth-century France as a designation of the "new science" of the inner life, through a substantivization of the adjective "mystical," which, since the thirteenth century, had increasingly come to designate "what had become separate from the institution" (De Certeau 79–112). It was used "within and in reference to groups that were furthest removed from the theological institution; like many proper nouns, it first took the form of a nickname or accusatory term" (107). Evidently, then, "mysticism" – the usual English term since the nineteenth century (McGinn 267) – was not coined as a neutral descriptor, but as a polemical tool (and later as a theological concept) designed to grasp and illumine certain western Christian phenomena of the seventeenth century.

This more modern understanding of mysticism, however, which implies individualism, emotionalism, or opposition to the ecclesial institution, is inadequate for describing early Christian realities. As a matter of fact, extensive accounts of "mystical" experiences in the first person singular are largely inexistent before Augustine in the Latin west, and before Symeon the New Theologian in tenth-century Byzantium (see Chapters 13, 14, and 18, this volume). The "mysticism" of pre-Nicene Christianity, especially as it comes to expression in proto-Orthodox writers (i.e. those claimed by later Orthodoxy to have been normative for early Christianity), consisted of a complex synthesis of biblical exegesis, spiritual pedagogy, ascetic theory, Eucharistic devotion, doctrinal articulation, and martyric performance, which carried on and gradually transformed the symbolic world of Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism while gradually inculturating itself within the Greco-Roman commonwealth.

Mystical Cosmology, Temple Mysticism, and Their Continuation in Christianity

Following a general Near-Eastern pattern, the Bible depicts the God of Israel as the ruler of a heavenly world: seated on a fiery throne of cherubim in the innermost sanctum of a heavenly temple, and attended by thousands upon thousands of angels, arranged in precise ranks and orders, and performing their celestial liturgies according to precisely appointed times and rules (Weinfeld 191–209; Mettinger; Elior 40–62, 82–87). Throne-imagery looms large in prophetic visions such as Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1, which offered the basis for rich developments in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism (de Jonge) (see Chapter 8, this volume). Scholars have exhaustively documented correspondence between the heavenly world of Jewish apocalyptic literature and the imagery of the Jerusalem Temple (Elior 2005; Morray-Jones 1992; 1998; Himmelfarb). Thus, the summit of the cosmic hierarchy is the innermost chamber of a heavenly temple, where the enthroned anthropomorphic Glory of God (see Fossum 1999), guarded by the "angels of the presence," makes itself accessible to a few elevated figures.

The mystical cosmology of Second Temple apocalypticism constituted the general framework of early Christian discourse, ritual, and ascetic praxis. A celestial "hierarchy" – if the anachronism is acceptable (this term was coined centuries later by the anonymous author of the Pseudo-Areopagitic Corpus) – occurs in first-century pseudepigrapha that enjoyed great popularity in early Christianity, such as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Tet. Levi 3) and the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah. The latter offers descriptions of the seven angelic ranks and of their celestial liturgies, and – most importantly – attempts to explain the significance of Christ's descent and re-ascent within that framework. It has been argued (Bucur 2009) that Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) provides the ideal entry-point into these earlier Christian traditions. Clement left behind a body of writings vaster and more varied than that of any Christian writer before Origen (c. 185–254) (see Chapter 10, this volume). Despite Clement's self-assumed mission of presenting a bold and intelligent account of the faith, his corpus preserves an invaluable collection of older traditions (whether "Jewish," "orthodox," "heretical," "Greek," or "barbarian"). Most importantly, however, in his *Prophetic Eclogs* and *Adumbrations*, where he claims to provide a written record of oral traditions inherited from earlier charismatic teachers, to whom he refers to as "the elders," Clement furnishes a detailed description of the spiritual universe. Having at its pinnacle the Logos, Clement's spiritual universe features, in descending order, the seven protoctists, the archangels, and the angels. The purpose of hierarchy consists in "advancement" (prokopē) on the cosmic ladder, which leads to the progressive transformation of one level into the next: the believers are being instructed by the angels, and, at the end of a millennial cycle, they will be translated into the rank of angels, while their instructors will become archangels, replacing their own instructors, who will in turn be promoted to a higher level (Ecl. 56–57). Placed at the pinnacle of the cosmic ladder, absorbed in unceasing contemplation of the Face of God, the protoctists represent the model of perfected souls (Exc. 10.6; 11.1).

Following the example of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–c. 40 CE) (see Chapter 4, this volume), whose "noetic exegesis" of authoritative texts, such as the Bible or Plato (Osborn) was embraced by Alexandrian Christianity, Clement of Alexandria internalizes the cosmic ladder and the associated experience of ascent and transformation. All imagistic details, such as specific intervals of space or time ("seven days," "one thousand years," "seven heavens," "archangels," "protoctists," etc.) were emptied of the literal meaning they had had in the apocalyptic cosmology of the "elders." A fitting formula to describe Clement of Alexandria's treatment of the inherited apocalyptic cosmology of the elders would be "interiorized apocalypticism," defined as "the transposition of the cosmic setting of apocalyptic literature, and in particular of the 'out of body' experience of heavenly ascent and transformation, to the inner theater of the soul" (Golitzin 2001: 141). Reread in this manner, the cosmic ladder becomes a metaphor for the spiritual ascent of every believer. The perfected Christian – "the Gnostic soul" – is described as possessing unmediated, perfect access to the vision of the Face, taking its stand in his immediate proximity (Adumbr. Jude 5.24). Indeed, any devout Christian "studies to be a god" (Strom. 6.14.113), and that those who attain to the rank of the protoctists "are called by the appellation of 'gods,' to be co-enthroned with the other 'gods' that have been set in first place by the Savior" (Strom. 7.10.56–57). Until then, the perfected human is described as "an angel on earth, but already luminous, and resplendent like the sun" (Strom. 7.10.57), even "a god going about in the flesh" (Strom. 7.16.101).

Transformational Mysticism: From Angelification to Theōsis

The theme of transformation from a human into an angelic being, or at least of becoming "angelomorphic," was abundantly present in Jewish apocalyptic literature (e.g., 1 En 71.11; 4QSb 4.25; 2 En 28.11; T. Levi 4.2). The covenanters at Qumran, for instance, "expressed profound identification with the angels . . . they envisaged a heavenly cult of angelic priests," and saw themselves as "partners and counterparts of the angels" (Elior 58, 171, 99, 93). A perfect example of such "transformational mysticism" can be found in the Book of the Watchers (=1 Enoch 1–36), written in the third century BCE, decades before the apocalyptic section of Daniel (chs. 7–12), and in the later 2 (Slavonic) Enoch, dated to the first century CE. According to these texts, the patriarch ascends through the heavens and becomes acquainted with the various levels angelic denizens and their worship. At the climax of his heavenly journey, he gazes on the enthroned anthropomorphic "Glory of God" (Ezekiel 1:26), is "anointed," "crowned," "robed," and endowed with the name of God. Being thus transformed into a (simili) angelic entity, he partakes of the divine glory, knowledge, and majesty, and is conferred upon the authority of mediation and judgment (e.g., 1 En 71; 2 En 22). These views, even though usually criticized by the Sages (Elior 201–231), continue to hold sway in certain strands of later Jewish mysticism (3 En 15.48C), which even depicts Enoch as having become "the lesser YHWH" (3 En 12), virtually indistinguishable from God.

Emerging Christianity also described the eschatological destiny of humankind as a transformation towards an angelic or simili-angelic status: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51); "they

are like the angels" (Matthew 22:30), "equals of the angels" (Luke 20:36). Scholars have noted that largely under the influence of Matthew 22:30 and Luke 20:36, "the Christian life was popularly conceived to be an imitation of the angels. In particular, the exhortation to asceticism was often supported by appeal to the model of the angels" (Davies and Allison 3: 229; Brock 6–8). In the early third century, Tertullian (c. 160–225 CE) still envisaged a process of real "angelification" (*marc.* 3.9.4, 7). Nevertheless, the notion of an angelic transformation at the end time was recontextualized and made dependent on the Christian kerygma. For instance, according to Philippians 3:20–21, the transformation of the believer is effected by Christ upon his end-time return, and consists of a change that results in a "christomorphic" humanity. It is no wonder, therefore, that some early Christians expressed the conviction that, at the eschaton, humanity would even surpass the angels. In 2 (Syriac) Apocalypse of Baruch (early second century), for instance, the righteous "shall be transformed into the splendor of angels" (5.5) and "they shall be made like unto the angels" (5.10), and yet "the excellence of the righteous will be greater than that of the angels" (5.12). The best known proponent of this view was Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–200): after the parousia, humankind will "contain the Word, and ascend to Him, passing beyond the angels" (haer 5.36.3; see de Andia 327–328).

The interiorized ascent to heaven and transformation before the divine Face, so prominent in Jewish apocalypticism, was what Christian tradition calls, in shorthand, *theōsis*, "deification." Indeed, we know that "by the time Porphyry first wrote of the philosopher deifying himself, Christians had already been speaking of deification for more than a century" (Russell 52). Writing not long after Irenaeus of Lyon affirmed that "the Word of God was made man . . . so that man, having been taken into the Word and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God" (haer. 3.19.1), Clement of Alexandria was "the first ecclesiastical writer to apply the technical terms of deification to the Christian life" (Russell 121). This is the same Clement who reports of the archaic Christian tradition of a real "angelification."

After the third century, the idea of a real "angelification" was gradually discarded. Despite extensive talk about the ascetical holy man living as an "angel in the body," and despite the depiction of an angelic life in heaven, the transformed holy man of later monastic literature is "angelomorphic" rather than "angelic."

The Body as Temple: Ascetical and Mystical Anthropology

The Shepherd of Hermas (c. 90–130) is perhaps the most significant work of Christian asceticism in the pre-Nicene era. Reworking the imagery of Temple sacrifice and angelic liturgy current in Second Temple Judaism, offering a "summary of Jewish Christian moral and ascetical theology" (Daniélou 1964: 37), and anticipating important elements of later Christian ascetic theory, this work is remarkable for its theory of prayer and for its affirmation of the connection between temple liturgy, interior liturgy and the liturgy of heavens.

For the Shepherd, the ascetic life of the Christian is intimately linked to the phenomena of divine inhabitation and angelic intercession. The identity of the celestial agent remains unclear, as the text seems to use "angel" and "spirit" interchangeably, and, fur-

thermore, uses "spirit" also for the Son of God (Bucur 2009: 120–125). Inversely proportional to its disinterest in doctrinal precision or terminological coherence is the Shepherd's emphasis on the dynamic aspect of Christian religious experience, its detailed description of the "mechanics" of the ascetical and mystical phenomena, and its rich analysis of the means of discriminating between authentic and deceitful spiritual experiences. The mission of the indwelling pneuma (whatever its identity: the Holy Spirit, the angelic spirit, the powers of the Son) is described as an act of worship, a "liturgy" (Mand 5.1.2), an act of intercession on behalf of the righteous and against sinners (Mand 10.41.5). Hermas's theory of prayer and prophecy appears to be based on the logic of Old Testament sacrificial rites – only pure and blameless sacrifices can be admitted at the altar – and on the widespread Second Temple imagery of angels bringing the prayer of the humans to the heavenly altar (Stuckenbruck 173–180). Thus, in the absence of a pure place, the indwelling spirit is unable to perform his worship (Mand 5.1.3). Overall, the Shepherd is quite insistent on the use of "place": the interaction between the angel and the prophet occurs in the nebulous "place" of visions (Vis 1.1.3; 2.1.1; 3.1.3–5; 4.1.2; Sim 8.4.1; 9.5.6; 9.10.3.), in the interior "place" of the interior liturgy (Mand 5.1.3), as well as in the prophetic ministry to the congregation, where the congregation itself constitutes, as it were, the "place." In the case of saintly persons, the Shepherd can also claim, "their place is already with the angels" (Sim 9.27.3).

The language of "place" (Hebrew maqom; Greek topos) is noteworthy, as it has a rich biblical resonance – it is used for Bethel, Sinai, or the Jerusalem Temple – and will become a key concept in later patristic and rabbinic mystical literature (see Golitzin 2003: 407–408). The theme of prayer as interiorized temple sacrifice was later used by a reader of Shepherd, Origen, and by Origen's readers, the Cappadocians (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, On Virginity 24). It is very likely that the Shepherd's intriguing statements about the "narrow" and "hard" recesses of the heart were received also by the mediation of Origen (see Comm in Rom. 2.6.6). The connection between the themes of prayer as Temple offering, the requirement of purity, and – significantly, for an author judged to be "archaic," and who has no connection whatsoever with either Hermas or Clement of Alexandria – strong echoes of angelomorphic pneumatology are also to be found in Aphrahat the Persian Sage and other early Syriac writers. The simultaneity between temple liturgy, interior liturgy and the heavenly liturgy before the divine throne places the Shepherd at an earlier stage of the "three-church tradition" witnessed towards the fifth century by the Syriac *Liber Graduum* (Book 12).

Hermas's favorite ways of expressing the effect of divine indwelling are "clothing" (Sim 9. 13.5), "renewal" (Vis 3.16.9), "purification" (Vis 3.16.11; Vis 3.17.8), "rejuvenation" (Vis 3.21.2), and "strengthening" (Vis 3.20.3). This allows us to draw a connection between the individual and communal practice asceticism and the experience of martyrdom.

Heavenly Mysteries and the Mysteries of the Church: Eucharist and Martyrdom

Starting as early as the first century, the concern of early Christians "was to relate the mysteries of the heavenly world – angelic ranks, etc. – to the central and commanding

mystery of Christ's death and resurrection" (Daniélou 1962: 214). We find strong echoes of this delicate balance in the New Testament, for example in 2 Corinthians or John 3. In confronting the "superapostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5) boasting of visions and charismata, Paul does not challenge the validity of either, but he writes to correct a visionary practice that he judges to be misguided and to reaffirm what he understands to be the authentic type of Christian spirituality: one more radically patterned on the incarnation, and one whose visionary component is shaped by concern for the ecclesial community and by principles of spiritual pedagogy (Humphrey 31–48). In John 3, the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus concerns precisely *ta epourania*, "heavenly realities" (John 3:12), namely ascending to heaven (John 3:13), entering the kingdom of God (John 3:4), and seeing the kingdom of God (John 3:3). The Forth Gospel's authoritative reply to such interests is not a dismissal *in toto*, but a redirecting of the search for vision towards an incarnational, sacramental, and communitarian context (Grese 1979; 1988) (see Chapter 7, this volume).

In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–c. 110) dealt in a similar manner with challenges to his leadership posed by various charismatic visionaries, nurtured, as has been suggested, by the spirituality of the Ascension of Isaiah. In reaction to his opponents, Ignatius set forth an anti-Docetic spirituality that revolves around the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ (Mag. 11; Trall. 9–10; Smyrn. 2) and was continuously kept in check by the concrete life of the ecclesial community and its hierarchy, and, again, by principles of spiritual pedagogy. He notes: "Am I not able to write to you about heavenly things (*ta epourania*)? But I fear that I could cause you harm, since you are infants . . . I am able comprehend heavenly things (*ta epourania*), both the angelic locations and the archontic formations – although it is not on account of this that I am already a disciple" (Tral. 5.1–2). The point here is, first, that his opponents embodied the wrong kind of vision; second, that knowledge of the arrays of the angels and the musterings of the principalities, although not a bad thing, was not what makes one a Christian; and, third, that such knowledge of "heavenly things" was not to be disclosed carelessly. Similarly, the event of Christ's descent to earth and ascent after the resurrection – both simultaneously awesome and mysterious – dwarf any "heavenly mysteries" trumpeted by the various apocalyptic visionaries (Eph. 19.2–3).

With the explosion of dualistic theologies in the mid-second and third centuries, similar tensions can be discerned between the claims to mystical experience and knowledge made by the hierarchical church as opposed to those of various "Gnostic" conventicles. The central revelation ascribed to the Valentianian master known as "Marc the Magician," for instance, concerns the celestial manifestation of the ineffable God as "Body of Truth," a heavenly anthropomorphic reality composed of thirty letter in four distinct enunciations (haer 1.14; Sagnard 358–369; Förster 229–292). While the mainstream church (the "psychics") can only comprehend the "sound" of the celestial Name – the six-letter name "Jesus" – the Marcosian initiates have access to the celestial Name, by virtue of their (presumably "pneumatic") co-naturality. Yet for Marc's critic, Irenaeus of Lyon, Christian experience must be guaranteed by the church's "rule of the truth received by means of baptism" (haer. 1. 9.4), which is in turn guaranteed by apostolic succession and intercommunion between the local churches, and it involves the transfiguration of the body rather than casting it away (haer. 5.6. 1; 5.8.1).

Far from opposing charisma and institution, Ignatius viewed the threefold order of ministry – in other words, the "institution" – as itself a spiritual reality. Thus, it is only in unity with the bishop (Smyrn. 8; Trall. 2; Mag. 7) that Christian life leads one to becoming "God-bearers and temple-bearers and Christ-bearers" (Eph. 9.2). For his part, Clement of Alexandria viewed the locus of continual advancement to the transformative vision of God as being not only the "celestial hierarchy," but also its continuation in the ecclesiastical hierarchy: "the advancements (*prokopai*) pertaining to the church here below, namely those of bishops, presbyters and deacons, are imitations (*mimēmata*) of the angelic glory" (Strom. 6.13.107).

Overall, for "proto-orthodox" writers, spiritual experience had to be shaped and validated by prior commitment to orthodox christology and by the sacramental and communitarian context of the hierarchical apostolic church (Eph. 20.2), and come to public expression in the grand spectacle of martyrdom. Tertullian's well-known phrase "the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians" (*Apology* 50) expressed the belief that martyrdom – the act of "witnessing" to Christ publicly, in spite of (and in the midst) of humiliation, torture, and, eventually, death – triggers an effusion of spiritual power that, paradoxically, renders Christianity irresistibly attractive for outsiders. Beginning with the first martyr Stephen, early Christians saw martyrdom as an imitation of Christ's suffering (Acts 7:59–60, cf. Luke 23:34.46) and subsequent "entry into glory" (Luke 24:26).

It is true, to a certain extent, that the radical witnessing to one's Christian faith through martyrdom was succeeded, especially after the fourth century, by the type of radical dedication to the ideals of the Gospel that one finds in the ascetical and mystical lifestyle of what would later become monasticism. Nevertheless, the language of athletic contest, military discipline, subduing the body, receiving celestial crowning and clothing, etc., is common to both ascetic and martyric literature (Brock 2). If the designation of ascetic labors as "martyrdom" is a commonplace in monastic writings, it is true, conversely, that pre-Nicene writers often viewed asceticism as training for martyrdom. As has been noted from a medical and psychological perspective, martyrs were able to endure extraordinary pain and suffering because they were "fortified . . . by an ascetic training that allowed them to break the links between torture and psychic disintegration" (Tilley 467). Such training for "successful" martyrdom can be detected in the earliest Christian writings (Pauline corpus, Book of Acts, Revelation, Hebrews, 1 Clement, Barnabas, Ignatius of Antioch). During the second and third centuries, a certain differentiation is evident between North Africa, Asia Minor, and Gaul, where the emphasis falls on the apocalyptic or millennial qualities of martyrdom, and Alexandria, where the training for martyrdom came close to philosophical paideia (Darling Young 11).

The main ingredients of early Christianity's mysticism of martyrdom remain, however, the ascetic theory outlined above (see "The Body as Temple") and the Eucharistic mysticism exemplified by Ignatius of Antioch, who described martyrdom not only as the beginning of true Christian discipleship (Eph. 1.2; 3.1; Rom. 4.2), the fulfillment of his episcopal ministry (Eph. 21; Rom. 2.2), and, generally, the royal avenue to Christ-likeness (Rom. 6.3), but also as a sacramental oblation: "I am the wheat of God, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread" (Rom. 4.1).

Aside from transforming imperfect humans into perfect sacramental oblations, martyrdom "was the instantiation of the Temple's new presence among Christians, who saw themselves as true Israel and spiritual temples" (Darling Young 12). It is clear that early Christian views of both the Eucharist and martyrdom ultimately reworked the biblical themes of temple and temple sacrifice, as filtered through the lens of Second Temple apocalypticism.

Exegetical Mysticism: Biblical Interpretation as Mystagogy

Early Christian mysticism was inextricably linked to the interpretation of Scripture. All varieties of Christianity (the so-called proto-Orthodox, as well as Gnostics, Valentinians, Marcionites, Sabellians, etc.) shared the notion of biblical exegesis as an enterprise whose finality is the experience of progressive transformation, both of the individual and of the community: exegesis not aimed at mastering a textual "object" but rather at mediating an encounter with divine mystery. This approach was, of course, not peculiar to Christianity. Most teachers of wisdom in the early centuries of the common era – whether Platonists, Stoics, Jews, or Christians – viewed their work as a transformative pedagogy, a "spiritual exercise" (Hadot; Rizzerio 159) designed to guide the student along a path of ethical, intellectual, and spiritual formation. Rabbinic Judaism knew of a sequence in which the various Scriptures, or parts thereof, are to be read. Origen spoke with admiration of Jewish traditions that placed the Song of Songs, together with the beginning of Genesis, and the throne-vision and Temple-vision in Ezekiel, among the so-called deuterōseis – writings that "should be reserved for study till the last," because they concern the highest mysteries of the divinity (Origen, Comm. Cant. prol. 1.7). Indeed, Song of Songs could be read as "a strictly esoteric text containing sublime and tremendous mysteries regarding God in his appearance upon the throne of the Merkabah" (Scholem 39) (see Chapters 2 and 8, this volume).

   Greek philosophy proposed a curriculum consisting of various "parts" – for Plato, ethics, physics, and dialectics (understood as science of the Forms); for Aristotle, ethics, physics, and theology or first philosophy; or, since Plutarch (c. 46–120 CE), ethics, physics, and epoptics. In Clement and Origen, these latter terms designated, roughly, the stages of moral purification, contemplation of the spiritual structures of created reality, and, finally, vision of and union with the divine. In the prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen stated that the Solomonic writings (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs) illustrate the ethics – physics – epoptics sequence, and argued that the Song of Song is to be classified in the latter category (Comm. Cant. prol. 3.1, 4). In fact, as scholarship has shown (Hadot), Origen's "mystagogical curriculum" of biblical studies applied the ethics – physics – epoptics sequence both to the Old Testament as a whole (Law – Prophets – beginning of Genesis, Ezekiel's throne-vision, Song of Songs) and to the New Testament (Matthew and Luke–Mark–John).

   Origen's fusion of Greek epopteia and Jewish deuterōseis may have been anticipated by Clement of Alexandria. Relevant in this respect are texts such as Strom. 1.28.176, where Clement characteristically reconciles "the fourfold division of Moses's philosophy" with the threefold scheme of ethics, physics, and epoptics, and Strom. 4.1.3,

where, according to Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa, he lays out something similar to the "secret tradition" of rabbinic circles (Mishna Hagiga 2.1): an initiation into "the things pertaining to creation" (ma'asse bereshīt) and the mysteries of the divine chariot-throne (ma'asse merkavah), on the basis of mystical exegesis of key texts in Genesis and Ezekiel.

It is clear, in any case, that the mysticism of the pre-Nicene era was very much linked to biblical exegesis. The Logos-doctrine of a Clement or Origen offered the hermeneutical basis for a curriculum designed to meet the students at their lowest level – paganism – exhort them "to the laver, to salvation, to illumination" (Protr. 10.94), then train them in virtue, and instruct them into increasingly higher levels of the revelation by means of gradual descent into the depths of Scripture. There was an intimate link between the activity of the Logos and that of the Christian teacher, who derived the sequence of catechetical activity from the oikonomia of the divine Logos (Neymeyr 64–65; Kovacs). The unity and coherence of the curriculum was given by the fact that it is the same Logos who exhorts, trains, and teaches. The variety of levels was a natural result of the different levels occupied by the addressees of the Logos.

Trinitarian Mysticism: "Three Powers in Heaven"?

The separability and opposition between "doctrine" and "public worship," on the one hand, and "the inner life," on the other, usually implied by popular usage of "mysticism," simply does not characterize any segment within the broad spectrum of second- and third-century Christianity. If Rabbinic Judaism viewed its literature as an elaborate "fence around the Torah," designed to prevent any possible transgression of the doctrinal, liturgical, and ethical commandments received on Sinai, early Christianity understood its articulation of doctrine as an act of "fencing around" the church's spiritual experience of the central mystery of Christ. Doctrine, in short, is itself "sacred" and "mystical," inasmuch as it offers the signs, signals, and markings of individual and communal journeys into God. As will become evident in what follows, the development of early Christian mysticism was coextensive with early Christianity's articulation of christological and trinitarian doctrine.

Characteristic of much pre-Rabbinic literature produced during the Second Temple era, and even more striking in the Jewish mysticism that rabbinic Judaism attempted to suppress (Segal 1977), was the growing tendency towards binitarian monotheism, along with a tendency to speculate on the "elevation" of patriarchal figures (Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Melchisedek, Jacob, Moses), who are said to have undergone a process of glorification and to have been transformed into angelic beings (see discussion below). The term "binitarian monotheism" is used in scholarship to designate a certain bifurcation of the divine, featuring a supreme divinity and a secondary more or less personalized manifestation of God: the Glory, the Name, the principal angel, the Son of Man. In this light, the christological monotheism of the emergent Christian movement appears to be phenomenologically related to other types of Jewish binitarianism (Newman, Davila, and Lewis 1999; Boyarin 2004): Jesus is proclaimed as the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8), the form of God (Philippians 2:6), the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians

1:24), the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), the image of God (Colissians 1:15), the word of God (John 1:1), the name of God (John 12:28; 13:31; 17:1). Peculiar to early Christians, however, is the belief that the "second power" – the Logos or Son of God – "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), and the worship offered him as "Lord and God" (John 20:28) in a cultic setting.

Some scholars speak of an early binitarian stage in Christianity as "a primitive effort at what later became Trinitarian doctrine" (Hurtado 600, 651). In other words, the theology of "two powers in heaven" would be followed, logically, by one positing "three powers in heaven" (Segal 1977; 1999). For early Christians, however, it was the experience of "being in the Spirit" (Revelation 1:10), or being "filled with the Spirit" (recurring in Luke-Acts) that enabled the worship of Jesus ("binitarian monotheistic devotion"), on the one hand, and that was retained by Trinitarian formulae of faith, on the other (Bucur 2011). A text such as Ascension of Isaiah (8.17–18; 9.27–40) and its echoes in Irenaeus (Epid. 10) and Origen (De principiis 1.3.4) presented a seeming perfect example of "three powers in heaven" theology: the visionary sees God, the angel of Christ, and the angel of the Holy Spirit as three discrete entities. Nevertheless, the angelomorphic Holy Spirit is first and foremost "the angel of the Holy Spirit who has spoken in you and also in the other righteous" (Asc. Isa. 9.36) and, for Origen, the ground of all theognosy. In other words, the Spirit is the guide, the enabler, and the interpreter of the prophetic and visionary experience of worshipping Jesus alongside God. Generally speaking, the texts usually quoted as examples of "early Christian binitarianism" often claim to be rooted in a pneumatic religious experience that the readers are exhorted to emulate beginning with the very act of reading. When this mystagogical element is set aside, the ancient writers are often found to lack explicit references to the Holy Spirit, and are thus labeled "binitarian" (Bucur 2011).

It has been noted (Bauckham) that one of the most important building blocks for the claims about Jesus made in the NT and among early Christians was the use of throne imagery (especially as displayed in Psalm 101:1 and Daniel 7:13). The rich deployment of this throne-imagery was evidently dependent on a christological re-reading of Old Testament throne-visions and more generally, of Old Testament theophanies. Recourse to Old Testament theophanies was a crucial element in the major theological polemics of the pre-Nicene era. The New Testament often alludes to the divine Name (Exodus 3:14, ho ōn; Exodus 6:3, kurios), and proclaims Jesus Christ as "Lord" (kurios), obviously in reference to the Old Testament "Lord" seen by the prophets. This sort of "YHWH Christology," or "divine Christology," has been traced back to the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, the Pauline corpus, and the Catholic Epistle of Jude (Hanson; Ellis; Binni and Boschi; Capes 1992; Fossum 1987; Rowe; Gathercole). The Christological exegesis of theophanies (Christ as the One who appeared to Adam in the Garden of Eden, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to Moses on Sinai) in anti-Jewish polemics appears to have become normative by the middle of the second century, when it is used extensively in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*.

A second context in which theophanies played an important role is the anti-dualistic polemic of authors such as Irenaeus or Tertullian: their argument that Christ is not a "new" God rests upon the thesis that he has already manifested himself in the old dispensation. In the third century, theophanies were also part of the argument against

"modalistic" theologies, which downplayed or eliminated the distinction between the Father and the Son: since Christ had appeared in Old Testament theophanies, whereas the Father had not, it follows that the Son is distinct from the Father ("Epistle of The Six Bishops" in Bardy 16–18). The Christological exegesis of theophanies constituted "the bedrock of early Latin Trinitarian theology" as represented by Tertullian, Lactantius (250–325 CE), and Novatian (fl. 250) (Barnes 2003: 341), and was the background against which the major "tectonic shift" of Augustine's Trinitarian theology must be interpreted (Studer; Barnes 1999; 2003; Bucur 2008).

The christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies resulted in the identification of Jesus with one of the three angelic visitors enjoying "the hospitality of Abraham" (Genesis 18:1–8), with "the angel of great counsel" (Isa 9:5, LXX) and "the angel of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1). Following a distinction between nature and function already insisted upon by patristic exegetes, scholars have come to designate such cases as examples of "angelomorphic Christology," whereas the term "angelomorphic" signals the use of angelic characteristics, while not necessarily implying that Christ is simply one of the angels (Daniélou 1964: 146; Fletcher-Louis 14–15; Gieschen 1998: 4, 349).

Although less explored than angelomorphic Christology, a similar reworking of Jewish apocalyptic angelology can be discerned in early Christian pneumatology. Of relevance here is another prominent theme in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism, namely the select group of angels conducting their liturgy before the heavenly throne. Sometimes called "angels of the Face" (Jub 2:2, 18; 15:27; 31:14 T. Judah 25:2; T. Levi 3:5; 1 QH 6:13), the supreme angels constitute a select group of heavenly beings – often a group of seven (Ezekiel 9:2–3; Tob 12:15; 1 En 20; 90.21; Test. Levi 7.4–8.3; 2 En 19.6; Pr.Jos) – that enjoys privileged access before God. Among Christian texts, Revelation mentions seven spirits before the divine throne (Revelation 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6; 8:2), and the Shepherd of Hermas knows of a group of seven consisting of the six "first created ones" who accompany the Son of God as their seventh (Herm. Vis. 3.4.1; Herm. Sim. 5.5.3). Clement of Alexandria's group of seven protoctists, mentioned above, is depicted in undeniably angelic imagery, yet it also conveys a pneumatological content: the seven are not only "first created angels" and "first-born princes of the angels" (Strom. 6.16.142–143), but also as "the heptad of the Spirit" (Paed. 3.12.87). Even though, with the advent of the Arian and Pneumatomachian confrontations, it was bound to become highly problematic and eventually to be discarded, angelomorphic pneumatology, far from being an oddity of Clement's, constitutes a relatively widespread phenomenon in early Christianity (Bucur 2009).

The most important legacy of pre-Nicene mysticism is its transformation of the Jewish apocalyptic symbolic universe in light of the Christian *kerygma*, and the decided option, especially in Alexandria, in favor of a similar transformative appropriation of the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. Later patristic theology will follow in the footsteps of pre-Nicenes such as Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Clement of Alexandria by continuing to hold together sacred text, liturgy, and ascetico-mystical experience as elements of a hermeneutical circle, each unfolding its meaning in relation to the others: the ascetic, visionary, and liturgical experience detects a certain nexus between discrete biblical texts; this network of biblical texts determines a specific

doctrinal articulation; doctrine then shapes and guides the liturgical and ascetico-mystical practice.

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CHAPTER 10
Origen and His Followers

Augustine Casiday

The case could easily be made that Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 254) was incomparably the greatest Christian theologian of his time and indeed one of the greatest theologians ever. He pioneered systematic theology with his *First Principles*, and his *Hexapla* laid the foundation for textual analysis of the Bible; he wrote numerous occasional treatises and voluminous commentaries on books of the Bible. Admirers translated his works from Greek into Latin, thereby extending his influence. For our purposes, what matters most is the mystical vision that informs Origen's work. This, too, was hugely influential, as we will see from considering two prominent monks whose debts to Origen were manifold: Anthony the Great (251–356) and Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345–c. 399). From their writings, and from passing consideration of even later theologians, we will arrive at a sense of the major themes that Origen bequeathed to Christian mysticism.

To anticipate, Origen's strategies of interpreting Scripture (which we will observe in some detail) are integrated with his manner of living in such a way that they are mutually reinforcing. Hermeneutics and ethics combine and open the way to communion with God. The techniques for mystically interpreting sacred writings through allegory, which Origen adapted for Christian purposes,[1] are always aimed to transform the interpreter and to fit the interpreter to encounter God ever more fully. In what follows, we will see that Origen and those inspired by him shared an overall understanding of the cosmos, of the human place in the cosmos, and of the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ on a cosmic scale – all of which gives to Origen's mystical theology a universal scale.

A preliminary warning is necessary. Origen has been a controversial figure since his own lifetime. Any controversy roiling for over seventeen centuries will obviously change over time, but we can safely say in general terms that the debates about these "Origenists" chiefly concern allegations that they were corrupted by Platonism. In one way or another, such claims have beset Origen from the days when Jerome (c. 347–420) and Rufinus (c. 340–410) clashed about him (Clark), through the fierce controversies

of the sixth century (Diekamp; Hombergen), and beyond. After the "Second Origenist Controversy" the theological debates fade, leaving them a tarnished reputation with few (and often mistaken) specific assertions attaching to it. The powerful, negative associations attaching to Origen's name have tended to limit the willingness of right-minded readers to recognize the recurrence amongst Christians of techniques pioneered by Origen. By taking a deliberately broad approach to Origen and his legacy, signaled here by the use of the impartial neologism "Origenian" rather than the over-determined term "Origenist," this account of Origen and of his heirs attempts to be inclusive and exploratory. Since this chapter aims to analyze their works rather than to assess trends in contemporary scholarship (see Casiday 2004), I hope it suffices to acknowledge that the following interpretation is offered from the midst of lively scholarly conversations, without trying to be controversial.

Origen

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263–339) organized the sixth book of his *Ecclesiastical History* around the life and works of Origen, whom he admired greatly. That section of the *Ecclesiastical History* describes the persecution of Christians sponsored by the Roman emperors Septimius Severus (r. 193–211), Maximinus I (r. 235–238) and especially Decius (r. 249–251). Origen's life was punctuated by these outbreaks of persecution. Indeed, Eusebius relates how Origen's father was imprisoned and eventually executed – and how Origen yearned to join him but was thwarted by his mother. He disregarded her pleas that he should stay home, but she forced him to take her seriously when she hid his clothing (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.2.2). And it was owing to judicial torture suffered during the Decian persecution that Origen's health was broken and his life shortened (6.39.5).

Despite these outbreaks of sanctioned violence in the midst of his life, Origen accomplished remarkable things. From the tender age of seventeen, he was recognized as a teacher (6.3). His precocious intelligence was at least in part the result of a serious, almost obsessive, commitment to study and to prayer that Eusebius called the "philosophic way of life." Strange as that phrase may sound, it has become increasingly clear that the connotations of the English word *philosophy* are narrower than the connotations of the Greek φιλοσοφία or the Latin *philosophia.* Philosophy in the late ancient Mediterranean was a way of living (Hadot 1995: 126–144). Christians of that age sometimes used the expression "philosophic life" to describe a life that was profoundly informed by ethical reflection, spiritual attentiveness, and devotion to God. To return to Origen himself, Eusebius reports that he limited his sleeping and slept on the floor when he did sleep, that he restricted his eating, that he embraced poverty to the extent of going barefoot for several years – in brief, that in line with Christ's teachings he radically simplified his life the better to dedicate himself to God. Through these disciplines, Origen integrated his way of living and his way of thinking; for this reason, and not simply because he practiced self-denial, he was an ascetic.

Another detail in Eusebius' account of how Origen disciplined himself should be considered here. Eusebius relates that Origen castrated himself with an eye to Matt.

19:12 – a response to the text that Eusebius describes in a startling understatement as having been "rather impoverished and impetuous" (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.2: ἁπλούστερον καὶ νεανικώτερον). Scholars have debated whether Origen actually did so, whether this was a piece of libel, and even the social propriety of self-castration (cf. Caner). It seems improbable that Eusebius would have related a damaging rumor as fact, and in his own *Commentary on Matthew* 15:1–4 Origen deplored the literal interpretation of that verse by young men, which has about it something like the ring of experience. But ultimately whether or not Origen made himself a "eunuch for the kingdom's sake" is less important to our purposes than is the exegetical question that this anecdote raises: should all Scriptures always be understood literally?

However simplistically and impetuously the youthful Origen may have read Matthew's Gospel, in his mature reflections found at *First Principles* 4.2.4 Origen claims that there are in the Scriptures three levels of meaning which he likens to the three constituents of a human being: the flesh of the Scriptures, the soul of the Scriptures, and the spirit of the Scriptures. Each of those levels is appropriate to progressively advanced readers. The "flesh" is understood literally and can be read by the simple. The "soul" edifies those who have made progress in Christian living and have thus become capable of greater understanding through anagogical reading. As for the Scriptures' "spirit," this Origen explains in terms he takes from 1 Cor. 2:6–7: it is "wisdom for the perfect" and is the spiritual law, which is available through allegorical reading. Sometimes, says Origen (4.2.5), there is no bodily meaning at all in a given passage from the Scriptures. Even though it is not his chosen example at this point in *First Principles,* we can correlate his remarks here with his robust endorsement of an allegorical interpretation of Matt. 19:12. He claims that the point of Matt. 19:12 has nothing to do with male reproductive organs and everything to do with that "spiritual castration" which makes us servants of God as were Daniel, Ananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (*Commentary on Matthew* 15.5). Origen's practice of cross-referencing these stories is typical. It is also something that he does provisionally and with a note of hesitation. The reluctance to develop these connections at length is attributable, I think, to the logic of his thinking, in terms of which such an explanation would be inappropriate (possibly harmful) to novice readers and whilst being at the same time unnecessary for accomplished readers.

Origen attributes the unity of Scriptures to the Holy Spirit's "supervision" of their writing (*First Principles* 4.2.9). By identifying the Holy Spirit's role in this way, Origen can – and does – in effect treat all of the Scriptures as the single work of God. Though he does not elaborate on the implications of thinking in this way about the Word of God as being immediately *inspired* by God, Origen's assertion that the Holy Spirit supervised the writing of Scriptures provides some justification for introducing material from Dan. 1–3 into his exegesis of Matt. 19:12. Since the Holy Spirit was involved in the writing of both books, Origen can look for traces of divine authorship in both of them and can use what he finds in one sacred text to illuminate the meaning of another sacred text (Harl 173–181).

Through understanding Holy Scriptures, one comes into contact with God who makes those writings holy. It is because engaging with the Scriptures implies engaging with God that Origen stipulates preparations for exegesis that reach well beyond basic, linguistic competence. Origen's prefatory remarks to his commentary *On the Song of*

Songs describe the undertakings necessary to understanding and, not incidentally, mention that the process of encountering God in sacred writings is *mystical*. He begins by claiming that there is meaning behind the ordering of the three books by Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. The order of these books discloses a natural progression. And the progression across them corresponds, according to Origen, to a three-fold division of knowledge into ethics, physics and epoptics: "these we may respectively call moral, natural, and inspective" (*On the Song of Songs*, prol. 3.1).[2] The significance of all three terms and all three glosses in the context of interpreting scriptures were perhaps as unfamiliar to Origen's original readers as they are us now, because he explains them:

> That study is called moral . . . which inculcates a seemly manner of living and gives a grounding in habits that incline to virtue. The study called natural is that in which the nature of each single thing is considered; so that nothing in life may be done which is contrary to nature, but everything is assigned to the uses for which the Creator brought them into being. The study called inspective is that by which we go beyond things seen and contemplate somewhat of the things divine and heavenly, beholding them with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight. (prol. 3.3; trans. ACW 25:40)

The central purpose of Proverbs was to enable Solomon to teach "the moral science, putting rules for living into the form of short and pithy maxims, as was fitting" (prol. 3.6; trans. ACW 25:41). That the literary form "was fitting" to its purpose anticipates an important aspect of Origen's explanation of physics. For Origen's purposes, the relevance of physics has less to do with seeing the "mites of matter . . . darted round about" (Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.89–90; trans. Leonard 1916: 48) and much more with perceiving how the shape of the universe corresponds to its meaning as creation (*On the Song of Songs*, prol. 3.6; trans. ACW 25:41): "by discussing at length the things of nature, and by distinguishing the useless and vain from the profitable and essential, [Solomon] counsels us to forsake vanity and cultivate things useful and upright." The discipline of studying nature is not a morally disengaged activity; rather, it is an attempt to discern the moral contours of reality. The habits of virtue are refined with reference to the insights that derive from physics. The harmony of ethics and physics makes it possible for humans to live meaningfully and to thrive.

Origen's third and final term, epoptics or inspective science, requires extended attention since (unlike the others) it has no modern cognate that helps us to understand it. At Plato's *Symposium* 210a1 (written c. 380 BC), Diotima uses the word ἐποπτικά in describing to Socrates the revelations that a neophyte encounters upon initiation into a mystery cult. This sense was still current around Origen's time, for his near contemporary Plutarch (c. AD 46–120) uses it similarly. Thus, he relates how Demetrius sought admission to the *epoptika*, or higher mysteries, in Athens (*Demetrius* 26.1) and how Aristotle introduced Alexander into "those secret and more profound teachings which philosophers designate by the special terms 'acroamatic' and 'epoptic,' and do not impart to many" (*Alexander* 7.3, trans. Perrin 1919: 240). The coincidence in Plutarch's *Lives* of *epoptika* as the culmination of both philosophical instruction and mystical initiation is suggestive. On the basis of these and other testimonies, Pierre Hadot (2004: 153–154) calls epoptics "the supreme revelation of transcendent reality, as in

the Mysteries" and identifies it with metaphysics and theology since, like them both, it "ultimately entails the contemplation of God." Further consideration of Origen's prologue will confirm that these overtones are present when he uses the word epoptics.

Returning to the place occupied by the Song of Songs in Solomon's curriculum, we read in Origen's prologue 3.7:

> The inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book that we now have in hand – that is, the Song of Songs. In this he instills into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and the Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love. (trans. ACW 25:41)

The subject matter of the Song of Songs is communion with God "attained by the paths of charity and love," as described in frankly erotic tones (see Chapters 2 and 3, this volume). The poem's explicit sensuality marks it out as a thing reserved for mature readers. There is a radical shift from regarding the book as a wedding song that robustly celebrates physical pleasures, to regarding it as a wedding song for creature and Creator. Origen highlights the shift when he emphasizes that the final stages of this process are mystical and spiritual:

> This book comes last that a man may come to it when his manner of life has been purified and he has learnt to know the difference between things corruptible and things incorruptible; so that nothing in the metaphors used to describe and represent the love of the Bride for her celestial Bridegroom – that is, of the perfect soul for the Word of God – may cause him to stumble. For, when the soul has completed these studies, by means of which it is cleansed in all its actions and habits and is led to discriminate between natural things, it is competent *to proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters* [ad dogmatica venitur et ad mystica], and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead *with pure and spiritual love* [sincero et spirituali amore]. (*On the Song of Songs*, prol. 3.16; trans. ACW 25:44)

According to Origen, the characters in the love song are the perfect soul and the Word of God. He takes it as accounting for the drama of loving God. But we should not for that reason think that Origen's orientation to the text was as a reader imagining from a distance the events it described. The competent reader enters the text and thus proceeds to mystical matters, advancing to a pure and loving contemplation of God. What such a process entails is revealed in another account that Origen offers of how the faithful relate to Christ.

In his commentary *On John* 1, §171, Origen juxtaposes Jesus' claim, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5), and the statement to the disciples, "Ye are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). The juxtaposition is fruitful, as when Origen ponders how some receive their light from Christ with no mediation and how others receive the glory of Christ through the ministration of others:

> And as when the sun is shining the moon and the stars lose their power of giving light, so those who are irradiated by Christ and receive His beams have no need of the ministering apostles and prophets – we must have courage to declare this truth – nor of the angels;

> I will add that they have no need even of the greater powers when they are disciples of
> that first-born light. To those who do not receive the solar beams of Christ, the ministering
> saints do afford an illumination much less than the former; this illumination is as much
> as those persons can receive, and it completely fills them. (1, §165–166; trans. ANF 9:311)

Origen's final words here offer a tantalizing glimpse at the connections that bind together Christ's followers. Because the saints are able to enlighten others of the faithful, they are not simply individuals occupying individual relationships with Christ. Instead, they share amongst themselves the illumination that originates from Christ. The extent to which the saints participate in Christ is described in a startlingly direct passage in the commentary (6, §42; trans. ANF 9:353): "For Christ is found in every saint, and so from the one Christ there come to be many Christs, imitators of Him and formed after Him who is the image of God; whence God says through the prophet [Ps. 105.15.], 'Touch not my Christs.' "[3]

Reading Origen's claim that "there come to be many Christs," we recall a claim against so-called Origenism by its sixth-century opponents. The Origenists allegedly taught that all rational beings would ultimately become equals to Christ.[4] To what extent we should allow our evaluation of a theologian who flourished during the early third century to be informed by controversies of the sixth century, is a question that would require an unjustifiably lengthy excursus. It is more relevant simply to observe that Origen was not alone in describing Christians as Christs: the same description can be found in pages written by Cyril of Jerusalem and by Athanasius the Great (Casiday 2007: 521–525). The simple occurrence of that expression therefore tells us very little about how and what the person who used it thinks. Perhaps when he used it Origen was hinting that there will be total equality between Christ and the saints, but an equally plausible interpretation (and one less vulnerable to accusations of anachronism) finds in Origen's words evidence that creatures become Christs by assimilating to Christ's attributes through communion with Christ. Such an interpretation is supported by the formal parallels in Origen's teachings about how creatures can be deified (cf. Casiday 2003).

Though there is considerable interest in Origen's Christology, we must note that the Holy Spirit, too, plays an important part in Origen's description of the mystical life. He states that "the Spirit prays in the hearts of the saints" (*On Prayer* 2.5; trans. Chadwick 1954: 243). The relevance of this involvement by the Spirit is far-reaching. As Origen states elsewhere in the same treatise, prayer culminates less in a series of blinding encounters with God, than in a manner of living that is thoroughly suffused with prayer. Origen takes the apostolic exhortation to pray ceaselessly as an instruction literally to be followed, so that the saint (in whose heart the Spirit prays) becomes as it were a living prayer: "For thus alone can we accept 'pray without ceasing' [1 Thessalonians 5:17] as a practicable saying, if we speak of the whole life of the saint as one great unbroken prayer: of which prayer that which is commonly called prayer is a part" (12.2; trans. Chadwick 1954: 262).

By comparing Origen's comments from his *On John* to the prologue to his commentary *On the Song of Songs*, we can see that Origen's thinking about the ways that the faithful relate to God is dense with images of contemplation, encounter, transformation,

and identity. These indications confirm our presumption that the language of mysticism we have found in Origen's description of epoptics is indicative of his thinking about how reading and reflection are indispensible elements of Christian living. Origen's protocols for interpreting Scriptures point to the conclusion that reading the Bible is a spiritual exercise the performance of which heralds maturation as a Christian, beginning with the formation of virtuous habits and culminating with the achievement of likeness to God. Profound understanding of the Word of God is by its nature mystical.

Anthony the Great

As the subject of an astoundingly popular hagiography, Anthony the Great's life needs little introduction. We note merely that the *Life of Anthony*, by its own admission, promoted Anthony as the archetypal monk. In this it was so successful that the hagiography has effectively eclipsed all other sources about Anthony. And that is a strange fact. Hagiographies by their nature idealize their subjects. Similar practices can of course be found elsewhere; direct, naturalistic presentation is merely one option among many and it is not necessarily the best vehicle for conveying the truth. As Czesław Miłosz observed (170), "When a writer strives to present reality most faithfully he becomes convinced that untruth is at times the greatest truth. The world is so rich and so complex that the more one tries not to omit any part of the truth, the more one uncovers wonders that elude the pen." His point is important here because the claims made in the *Life of Anthony* that Anthony had not learned his letters (1.2–3, 72.2, 78.1) and was "taught-by-God" (66.2) might be an untruth that relates a greater truth – that Christianity was in competition with paganism (to use the Christians' own polemic word) and that each claimed to teach how one ought to live. Taking as bare fact the claims that Anthony was uneducated is, I argue, to disregard how those claims buttress the image of Anthony that the *Life* was disseminating and thus to read the *Life* naively. It is also to handicap our ability to identify and to evaluate the profound similarities that Anthony's teachings have with the theology of Origen.[5] What impedes the evaluation of those similarities is the fact that generations of readers have supposed that Anthony was not, indeed could not have been, intellectually sophisticated in terms of the culture of his day. The strength of these presumptions is such that Anthony has become a kind of exemplar of holy ignorance and father of an anti-intellectual monasticism.

And yet, given the *Life*'s constant emphasis on Anthony as a hermit, his avoidance of formal education can readily be taken as a youthful demonstration of his preference for solitude – instead of a precocious rejection of intellectual discipline. Furthermore, literacy is relative to a variety of circumstances and is not an absolute (cf. Wipszycka): to know that Anthony didn't "have letters" is to know very little about him indeed. By regarding those claims in the *Life* as elements in an anti-pagan polemic, rather than as a simple statement that Anthony was ignorant and illiterate, it is easier for us to understand how Anthony could have engaged in conversations with philosophers (*Life* 72.1–80.7). No doubt, Anthony is depicted as hostile to Hellenism, but terms of his depiction owe much to Acts 4:13, where we learn of bold preaching by apostles who were uneducated and ignorant (ἀγράμματοί … καὶ ἰδιῶτα). Such scriptural echoes alert us to the

need for nuance in our interpretation of the *Life*. If the details about Anthony's intellectual formation serve rhetorically to distance him from his opponents, rather than to provide us with biographical data, then the sophistication he demonstrates when interviewed by pagan philosophers makes more sense. Arguing from basic principles, Anthony debates epistemology and morality with the philosophers. These topics are part of a larger philosophical curriculum. As Samuel Rubenson rightly notes (62), "Virtue is not only necessary for knowledge, it *is* knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge is as much a moral and spiritual as an intellectual exercise."

A source about Anthony other than the *Life* elaborates on his teachings about the universe and our place in it: "Once asked by a philosopher how he could endure a life without the consolation of books, Anthony is reported to have answered, 'My book, o Philosopher, is the nature of creation, and it is to hand when I wish to read the words [λόγους] of God.'" This saying is preserved by Evagrius Ponticus (*Praktikos* 92), and also related by Socrates Scholasticus (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.23). It is interesting that Evagrius says Anthony was "reported to have" said this, since the Latin version of apophthegmata prepared by Pelagius and John (*Verba Seniorum* 4.16) also reports this incident. This coincidence indicates that the anecdote circulated with other sayings of desert fathers. In any case, the claim that the universe is a book in which God wrote words, or meanings, and from which they can be read adds a further layer to Anthony's philosophical outlook. It suggests that Anthony was interested in cosmology as well as epistemology and morality, in ways that we can compare to Origen's interest in physics.

That suggestion is borne out by Anthony's letters,[6] in which a major theme is that we should know ourselves and know our place in the order of creation. As Anthony writes in a typically dense passage, "A sensible man who has prepared himself to be freed at the coming of Jesus knows himself in his spiritual essence, for he who knows himself also knows the dispensations of his Creator, and what he does for his creatures" (*Letter* 3.1–2, Rubenson 196–231). Of the Creator's dispensations, Anthony identifies three mechanisms that enable creatures to know their place: the law of promise (*Letter* 1.2); the written law with its consequences for obedience and disobedience (*Letter* 1.9); and the afflictions God sends upon the hard of heart (*Letter* 1.16). Humans who respond to these opportunities are led by the Spirit back to "God, their own Creator" "through many fasts and vigils, through the exertion and the exercises of the body"; thus, the Spirit "begins to open the eyes of the soul, to show it the way of repentance, so that it, too, may be purified" (*Letter* 1.18–26). This movement is a return to the creatures' original condition (cf. *Letter* 1.30), or "first formation" (*Letter* 2.4), which was one of union with God (see also Perczel; Casiday 2002). According to Anthony, the Spirit works to heal creatures, body and soul – and this healing is closely associated with learning and knowledge.

Anthony's emphasis on knowledge is also evident when he describes the church as the "house of truth." The church has existed since the Creator "raised up Moses, the Lawgiver" to found it on the written law (*Letter* 2.10; cf. Bright). Although he and other forerunners contributed to this good work, it was Christ alone who could heal "the great wound" (*Letter* 3.20–21, 5.23, 6.88–90, 7.26–30) that estranged creatures from God. As the Father's "mind" (*Letter* 7.10: *sensus*, عقل), Christ is uniquely able to reconcile creatures to God "according to their 'mental' nature" (*Letter* 4.9: ⲕⲁⲧⲁⲧⲉⲩⲟⲩⲥⲓⲁ ⲛⲛⲟⲉⲣⲁ).[7]

Precisely because he regards Christ's role in salvation as indispensable and cosmic in scope, Anthony is committed to understanding Christ rightly. By extension, he is strident in his condemnation of Arius' Christology. Reverting to his claims about how knowledge of the self discloses fundamental truths about creation as the handiwork of God, Anthony attributes Arius' heresy to a lack of self-awareness (*Letter* 4.17–18) (see Chapter 11, this volume). Elsewhere, Anthony describes how negligence and misunderstanding precede falling "into the hands of the devil" (*Letter* 6.107). Through positive and negative claims, Anthony constantly emphasized the importance of knowing oneself and understanding one's place, so that one will respond actively and thankfully to God and embrace the opportunities for reconciliation with God.

Evagrius

From youth, Evagrius was marked out as a promising intellect (see Casiday 2006: 5–13). His early successes foundered upon a disastrous entanglement with a married woman, after which he made his way to the Egyptian deserts. There, under the tutelage of renowned monks, he matured into a mystical theologian of sophistication and subtlety. His advice was sought widely, both by correspondents and by pilgrims to the living saints of Egypt. Evagrius lived in a hermitage, with a novice or attendant, and frequently passed his nights in vigil by walking within the hermitage's courtyard reciting the Scriptures. His own monastic observations were so austere that he died aged merely fifty-four years – embarrassingly young when compared to Anthony's extreme longevity.

Evagrius affirmed a three-fold scheme of spiritual development that is parallel to Origen's as outlined in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs.* According to his definition of Christianity (*Praktikos* 1), the grades are ethical living (πρακτική), the contemplation of nature (φυσική), and theology (θεολογική or θεολογία). To each corresponds a specific goal (*Gnostikos* 49): "The object of good discipline [cf. πρακτική] is to cleanse the mind and to make it unreceptive to passions; the object of the knowledge of natures [cf. φυσική], to reveal the answer hidden in things; but to separate the human mind from all earthly things and to turn it back towards the First Mind of all, is the grace of seeing God [cf. θεολογική]."[8] Christian progress thus outlined by Evagrius is a journey along the course of which proper living leads to understanding and understanding leads to the vision of God.

As a hermit, Evagrius pursued these goals single-mindedly. He interpreted the insights born from these disciplines for the benefit of Christians generally, in line with his claim (13) that "it is appropriate to discuss the proper way of life with monks (μοναχοῖς) and seculars (κοσμικοῖς) and to give a partial explanation of those doctrines of natural contemplation and theology 'without which no one will see the Lord' [Hebrews 12:14]." The guarded terms of that second clause emphasize the need for discretion when discussing theological topics, which is needed when conversing even with monks: doctrines should be discussed only with the proficient (35).

These strictures are not determined simply by the maturity of those present; sometimes, the topics themselves demand them. "Do not theologize indiscriminately and

never define the godhead, since definitions are for created and composite things" (27). Evagrius repeatedly insists on the ineffability of God because words and definitions are inapplicable to the utter simplicity of the divine. A major challenge posed by Evagrius' writings is that they strain against the limits of language to convey what it means for a creature to encounter God. Evagrius' reflections on language are therefore integral to his mystical theology. Language and names are appropriate to composite, generated things. Because such things are synthetic and exist within time, they are subject to change in a way that God simply is not. Upon creation, says Evagrius, rational creatures existed in a "concord of will" of will with God (Evagrius, *Great Letter* 24, 26, Casiday 2006: 63–77). In this state, "before sin made a separation between the minds and God . . . they were one with him and undifferentiated" (29). But even then, the minds were distinguishable from the Trinity by their origins and modes of being (cf. 25).

Because they are created, temporal, and mutable, the rational beings can be alienated from God (63). Subsequent to their creation, says Evagrius (26), they exercised their free wills, introducing variation between themselves and God where there had previously been the "concord of will." Through exercising their will independently from God, the status of rational beings before God changed and, with it, so too did their qualities. Hereafter, they became distinguished by numbers and names (most conspicuously, the names "mind," "soul," and "body"). Evagrius calls this process a "depart[ure] from our own nature" (55).

The universe as we know it, according to Evagrius, is fashioned by God to facilitate the return of rational beings (5): "Now God in his love has fashioned creation as an intermediary. It exists like a letter: through his power and his wisdom (that is, by his Son and his Spirit), he made known abroad his love for them so that they might be aware of it and drawn near." The ability to read creation like a letter is characteristic of Christians proficient in natural contemplation. Thus, the very ordering of creation contributes passively to the salvation of fallen beings: creation exists in a way that fallen creatures can use.

In addition to the ordering of natural phenomena (indeed, *contrary* to that order), God intervenes directly to bring about the return of the fallen. The most conspicuous example of God acting "unnaturally" is the incarnation of God the Son, who "descended and endured everything that is ours because we departed from our own nature – that is, everything from conception to death. But it came upon him not as one whose actions deserved these punishments, but because of his natural love in freeing us from the curse and all that follows upon it (which we received because of our transgressions, but which he received without transgressing) – and he was able to blot them out from us" (55).

God's entry into the human condition renewed the possibility of unmediated contact between the Trinity and creatures, for which the term "theology" is proper and uniquely appropriate. At this level of proficiency, the "letter" of creation is surpassed by direct communication (cf. 8). Christians able to communicate with God in this way, and thus able to communicate *about* God to others, are theologians. Through approximating in their lives to a stable concord of will with God, Christians anticipate the drawing back of names and numbers and the raising of rational beings "to the order of the mind" (22). Ultimately, the minds will "mingle" with the Father – but when they do so they will not jeopardize the integrity of Trinity or the uniqueness of Christ. Because Evagrius

specified that restored unity with God generates no "quadrupled persons" or "doubled natures" (28), we can conclude that certain pantheistic tendencies in the subsequent Syrian tradition (see Chapter 12, this volume) were developments or excesses.[9]

According to Evagrius, the Holy Trinity can accommodate the diversity of creation in concord with no danger of confusing divine and human essences. In a comment that is retrospective and, by the logic of his mysticism, simultaneously eschatological, Evagrius describes the final encounter of creatures with God in these terms: (65), "Just as the journey of one seeking to arrive at the end of all torrents will arrive at the sea, likewise the one who seeks to arrive at the power of some created thing will arrive at the 'Wisdom full of diversity' [cf. Ephesians 3:10] who established it." It is perhaps the most fitting expression of Wisdom's diversity that it embraces and confirms all of creation.

The Ongoing Legacy

Origen's use of allegory in service of ascetical and spiritual progress is a major component of his legacy. His heirs differ with respect to what they took from that legacy. The breadth of Origen's influence is partially obscured if we defer to the old habit of presuming that his writings were implicitly heretical (a habit perpetuated by the use of the term "Origenist"), which creates persisting difficulties when we encounter loud echoes of Origen's thinking in unexpected places. Two examples taken from later in the tradition will bring this account of Origenian mysticism to a close. The first come from homilies preached in Coptic by Rufus of Shotep sometime before the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century; the second, from approximately contemporaneous writings by the Byzantine monk and theologian, Maximus the Confessor.

Fragments survive from 18 or 19 exegetical sermons by Rufus, on the gospels of Luke and Matthew (Sheridan 1998). In them, Rufus uses allegorical exegesis and its technical vocabulary to promote ascetical and monastic growth, in a way that shows clear continuity with Origen's work (Sheridan 1997; 1998: 241–308). This evidence contradicts long-standing preconceptions about the low state of theological and intellectual activity amongst sixth-century Copts. These findings have been challenged by two critics (Lucchesi 2000; 2002; Luisier), who argued that the fragments represent a translation of Greek material from the milieu of Evagrius; their criticism is on balance not persuasive (see further Sheridan 2003). The fragments from Rufus indicate that he subscribed to Origen's anthropology (*On Matthew*, frag. 28; cf. Sheridan 1998: 245), though not necessarily his metaphysics. They also allow us to say that Rufus' preaching demonstrates the characteristic application of exegetical techniques in conjunction with ascetical exhortation that we have identified with Origen.

By contrast, major elements of Origen's mystical vision of the universe, salvation, and Christ's role in them are instantly recognizable in letters Maximus the Confessor wrote to redress perplexing claims in earlier theological authorities (Blowers and Wilken). Generations of scholars have tended to approach Maximus' works as a highly selective retrieval of themes from Origen for Christian orthodoxy (thus, Sherwood). But, as I have noted with reference to some developments within the Syrian Origenian tradition, some characteristic features of "Origenist heresy" are demonstrably foreign

to Origen's own theology. It is no longer necessary to pay lip service to the idea that Origen stood in need of correction. Abandoning that perspective, we can instead see Origen as a teacher for Christians of many kinds and we can identify in his teachings "exercises [that] have as their goal the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being. They therefore have not merely a moral, but also an existential value. We are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a *way of being*, in the strongest sense of the term" (Hadot 1995: 127). To a remarkable extent, Origen developed biblical interpretation as the unequalled exercise for Christians, thus decisively shaping early mysticism.

Notes

1   The pioneering work of the great Hellenistic Jew, Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50), is often overlooked in this context. Greek philosophers and exegetes also employed similar techniques for the interpretation of the Homeric corpus, the early beginnings of which were contemporaneous to Origen (see Lamberton).

2   Trans. ACW 25:39, modified: with reference to SC 375:128, I prefer *epopticen* to *enopticen*.

3   The final word(s) of Ps. 105:15 (משיחי, τῶν χριστῶν μου) are usually translated into English as "my anointed ones."

4   Such is the implication of the twelfth and thirteenth anathemas against Origen frequently attributed to the Fifth Ecumenical Council (as in the English translation at NPNF, second series, vol. 14, 318–319); but on that material and its evidentiary value, see Louth 2003.

5   The formal parallels between Origen, the *Life of Anthony*, and Anthony have been extensively studied. See, e.g., Marx; Roldanus 1993; Kannengiesser.

6   Anthony was known from antiquity to have written seven letters (see Jerome, *De viris inlustribus* 88), but the content of the letters traditionally attributed to him have prompted some scholars to argue against their authenticity. However, I am persuaded by Rubenson's arguments that they are authentic.

7   With reference to the Coptic text (Winstedt 1906), I have modified Rubenson's translation in order to emphasize the semantic associations that link the probable terms at *Letter* 4.9 (οὐσία νοερά) and at *Letter* 7.10 (νοῦς); cf. Rubenson 47 n 3.

8   The text at SC 356:191–192 is probably sound, but I have preferred an actual ancient witness to the modern reconstruction; my translation is from Evagrius, *Gnostikos*, Frankenberg 1912: 552.

9   See Frothingham, and Marsh. I have been unable to consult Pinggéra. Note, however, that Origen's and Evagrius' influence on Syriac Christianity is not limited to heresy; see further Ramelli, and Perrone.

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Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite

Charles M. Stang

"Negative Theology" is a name given to a tradition within Christianity that confesses God to be so utterly transcendent, so beyond our concepts and names for God, that we must in fact "negate" them in order to free God from such cramped categories. "Negative" – in Latin *negativa*, as in the *via negativa* – is a translation of the Greek word *apophatikos*, from *apophasis* – sometimes rendered "unsaying" but more often simply "negation." Negative theology is often – but not always – "mystical" theology because its negations are explicitly in the service of soliciting an encounter with this transcendent God. By negating our concepts and names for God, so it is believed, we clear space within ourselves so that God can appear, so to speak, *as God*, that is, as the mystery God is and must be in order to be properly God. Thus negative theology proceeds on the assumption that the way we speak to and about God – principally in contemplative prayer – conditions the possibility of our having a "mystical" encounter with God.

Negative theology is also inseparable from "affirmative" theology for two important reasons. First, they are inseparable because the practitioner must have something to negate – namely, God's self-disclosure or revelation, be that revelation in the natural world, in the scriptures or, as in the case of Christian negative theology, in the incarnation of Christ. This means that negative theology looks to revelation almost as a trace or trail that we can follow back to the mysterious source of all revelation. Second, negative and affirmative theologies are inseparable because negation is not an operation performed once, but rather is a commitment to the perpetual affirmation *and* negation of God's revelation. "Affirmative" is a translation of the Greek word *kataphatikos*, from *kataphasis* – sometimes rendered "saying" but more often simply "affirmation." So when we speak of negative theology, most often we are speaking about a practice of *kataphasis* and *apophasis*, affirmation and negation of revelation, with a "mystical" aim, that is, encountering and entering into the mystery of God.

Negative theology is not peculiar to Christianity. In fact, much of the distinctive vocabulary and conceptual moves of Christian negative theology come from Platonism.

At different times and under different circumstances, negative theology has flourished in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Christianity, a mystical theology centered on *apophasis* and *kataphasis* is most associated with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a sixth-century author who wrote under the name of Paul's famous convert from Acts 17. Most scholars agree that the pseudonymous corpus of Dionysius constitutes the pinnacle of early Christian negative theology. But negative theology neither begins nor ends with Dionysius and disagreements over the relevant genealogy of Christian negative theology are common.

The standard narrative begins by tracing out the negative theology of Platonism from Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE) to Plotinus (205–270 CE), a philosopher of such originality and depth that contemporary convention marks the shift in this tradition by referring to him and everyone in his wake as "*Neo*-Platonists" (see Chapter 4, this volume). This tradition is then grafted onto the young trunk of Alexandrian theology, represented by Philo (15/10–45/50 CE), a Jew, and Clement (150–211/215 CE), a Christian (see Chapter 9, this volume), both of whom were keen on Hellenistic philosophy. This hybrid of Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian thought continues to mature under the care of the so-called "Cappadocians." All three "Cappadocians" – the two brothers, Basil of Caesarea (329–379) and Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (330–389) – hailed from the region of Cappadocia in Asia Minor, hence their collective title. All three also participated in the doctrinal debates of the fourth century and are regarded as stalwarts of the emerging orthodoxy. And finally all three, but especially Gregory of Nyssa, had a role to play in the development of negative theology. The negative theology of the Cappadocians enjoys further nourishment from later Neoplatonism of the Athenian variety, especially in the figure of Proclus (410–485 CE). All of this is then somehow inherited and synthesized in early sixth-century Syria by Dionysius the Areopagite (whose exact dates, as with his person, remain unknown).

While this standard narrative goes some distance in charting the development of negative theology, it also deserves some revision. This essay focuses on one familiar chapter in this standard narrative: the development of negative theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite. But this essay also proposes a revision to that chapter – namely, the inclusion of Arianism in the genealogy of negative theology. The effect is to defamiliarize this familiar chapter by looking not, as many do, to Gregory's *Life of Moses* as the most relevant precursor to Dionysius' mystical theology, but instead to his *Against Eunomius*, a long diatribe against the principal representative of the so-called "Neo-Arians" of the late fourth century. The motivation for this revision is a suspicion that Eunomius (c. 335–c. 394) and his teacher Aetius (d. c. 366), who together represent the "Neo-Arians," offer a radical negative theology, but one that forecloses the possibility of any relationship with the transcendent God, and so forecloses the possibility of mysticism. In other words, Aetius and Eunomius succeed in safeguarding the transcendence of an "unbegotten" God, but in so doing effectively banish that God from its creation. In short, I suspect that theirs is a negative theology that is decidedly anti-mystical. Placing two "orthodox" scions of negative theology (Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite) against a "heterodox" backdrop (Aetius and Eunomius) will show, as if in relief, how what was to become normative negative theology attempts to hold an apophatic faith in an unlimited and even

unknown God in tension with a mysticism centered on intimacy with that dizzying alterity.[1]

Aetius and Eunomius: The Exile of the Unbegotten God

Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria (c. 250–336), infamously insisted that the Son was not eternal, that "before he was begotten or created or defined or established (Prov 8:22–26) *he was not*" (Rusch 5). His principal reasons for insisting on the creation of the Son in time and his subordination to God the Father were to preserve monotheism and to safeguard the transcendence of the one unbegotten God. In sharp contrast, his bishop Alexander (d. 326) and after him Athanasius (c. 293–373) insisted on the eternal generation of the begotten Son from the unbegotten Father, insisting that only a fully divine Son could effect the salvation of the world. This view won the day, first at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and again at the Council of Constantinople in 381 – which councils together established what is now regarded as the "orthodox" doctrine of the Trinity. In the creeds of both councils, the relationship between Father and Son was specified with an innovative and troublesome term: *homoousios*, "consubstantial" or "of one essence."

For Arius, the eternal generation of the consubstantial Son from the Father amounted to the confession of two gods. In order to avoid polytheism, then, Arius drew a sharp distinction between the realm of the eternal and uncreated (in which God alone "resides" so to speak) and the realm of the temporal and created (in which the Son, and other creatures, reside). God thereby remains one, and transcendently dissociated from creation. Rowan Williams has suggested that Arius represents an early "apophatic" or negative theology, but one in which "the unknowability of God" amounts to "simply the inaccessibility of a kind of divine 'hinterland,' the mysteriousness of an indefinite source of divinity . . . an overplus of 'unengaged' and inexpressible reality . . . that is not realized in and as relationship, in God" (Williams 242). If Williams is right, then Arius succeeded in safeguarding divine unity and transcendence, but at the cost of exiling God from any and all relationship with creation.

It is often regarded as one of the great ironies of the fourth century that some among the second generation of Arians seem to have turned Arius' solution on its head. For if he distinguished Father from Son in order to preserve God's transcendence, this argument goes, then they compromised God's transcendence in order to distinguish Father from Son. The "they" here are the so-called "Neo-Arians"[2] – Aetius and Eunomius – also called by their opponents the "anomeans" or "dissimilarians" on account of their insisting that the Father and Son were dissimilar (*anomoios*) in essence. This insistence was a direct refusal of the Nicene term *homoousios*.

Aetius and Eunomius drew fire from many quarters. All three Cappadocians lobbied vigorously for Nicaea in the mid to late fourth century and ultimately prevailed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 in having the Nicene Creed confirmed in a revised form. But why did the Cappadocians focus so much attention on Aetius and Eunomius, whose influence was minimal? They were, after all, the leaders of a small and eventually sectarian movement, hardly representative of the "loose and uneasy

coalition" of anti-Nicene groups in the fourth century (Williams 166). The defenders of Nicaea focused their attacks on what R. P. C. Hanson calls the "radical left wing of Arianism" for the same reasons politicians today focus on the fringes of their opponents' coalition – namely, to discredit the center by showcasing the periphery (598). Leaving aside the anachronistic language of right and left, Hanson is correct that Aetius and Eunomius were radical – but not for the reason he thinks. Most scholars, like Hanson, regard them as the great kataphatic villains of the doctrinal debates, radical in their belief that insofar as we know the names of the divine persons – the unbegotten Father and the begotten Son – we know their essences, and we know their essences as distinct and different.

This interpretation of their radical theology owes much to a quote attributed to Eunomius by the church historian Socrates. He quotes Eunomius as saying, "God does not know more about his own *ousia* than we do, and it is not known more to him and less to us. But whatever we may know about it, that he also certainly knows; and conversely whatever he knows, that (knowledge) you will find exactly in us" (Hanson 629). If this is a genuine quotation, it would seem that Eunomius believed that we could know the essence of God as well as God could. Furthermore, it would seem that he and his teacher Aetius have no place in the genealogy of negative theology, other than as a heretically kataphatic spur to a properly orthodox, apophatic mysticism.

If we dig deeper into their sources, however, we will see that this characterization is quite false and that their seemingly radical kataphatic commitments are in fact a screen for a much more radically apophatic theology. Of Aetius' corpus only his *Syntagmation*, or "little treatise," survives: thirty-seven propositions that aim to demonstrate the absurdity of either the Nicene view that the Father and Son are *homoousios* or the so-called "semi-Arian" view that the Father and Son are merely *homoiousios*, of *like* essence. For Aetius, and Eunomius after him, the premier names of the divine persons are not Father and Son (for these almost invite confusion), but unbegotten (*agennêtos*) and begotten (*gennêtos*). Between the eternal, unbegotten God the Father and the created, begotten Son there exists an "incomparability of essence" since "each nature abides unceasingly in the proper rank of its nature" (*Syn.* §4).[3] This incomparability "demolishes" "the perverse doctrine of the 'homoousion' and the 'homoiousion'" (*Syn.* §4).

In his *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil of Caesarea attributes to Aetius the view that a difference in name indicates a difference in essence (Anderson 2.4, 18). Aetius held that the two names "unbegotten" and "begotten" indicate two distinct and incomparable essences. But just how names indicate essences becomes thorny when we consider the premier divine name, unbegotten. Aetius insists that "unbegotten is revelatory [*dêlôtikon*] of [God's] essence" (*Syn.* §16). Raoul Mortley has convincingly argued that Aetius is quite up-to-date on philosophical debates internal to Neoplatonic (and Neo-Aristotelian) circles – much more so in fact than his Cappadocian opponents. A little-known contemporary of Aetius', a Neoplatonist by the name of Dexippus, writes in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, "And thus one makes a statement about that which is in the subject, or in respect of the subject, in order that through their negation [*apophaseôs*] one might display essence [*ousian dêlôsê*] in the truest sense" (Mortley 91, 130). Like Dexippus, whose commentary Mortley suggests Aetius knew, the Neo-Arian

is trying to show or display essence through a negation – in his case *agennêtos*, *un*-begotten (131).

The connection to Dexippus raises the question: what does it mean to know the divine essence if that essence is negative, *un*-begotten? The infamous heresiologist Epiphanius (c. 315–403) preserves an alleged and startling quote from Aetius: "With such entire clarity do I know God and so fully do I know him and am acquainted with him, that I do not myself better than I know God" (Hanson 606). This quote, like Socrates' citation of Eunomius above, would seem to suggest in Aetius an astonishingly kataphatic confidence: I know God and myself with "entire clarity." And yet what does Aetius know? What knowledge is on offer through the divine name "unbegotten"? In §29, Aetius tells us that "the unbegotten hypostasis" or God is "incomparable essence per se" and that "it does not indicate its unapproachability externally but is per se incomparable and unapproachable since it is also unbegotten." The unbegotten God is essentially incomparable, to us of course, but also to the begotten Son. Lionel Wickham takes Aetius' appropriation of the Pauline negation "unapproachable" (*aprositos*) to mean that God's essence can be known, but known as radically transcendent, unique, and distant and "that there is no knowledge of God by way of mystical communion with his essence" (566). And so, if Epiphanius' quotation is genuine, when Aetius says that "with such entire clarity do I know God and so fully do I know him and am acquainted with him," he means that he clearly and fully knows God as unbegotten, but that this kataphatic knowledge of the divine essence in effect banishes God, for what he knows is that God is "per se incomparable and unapproachable." Our knowledge of the divine essence effects the exile of the unbegotten God.

The real face of so-called "Neo-Arianism," however, was not Aetius but his student Eunomius, against whom the emerging orthodox theologians wrote long, and often undisciplined, treatises. More of his writings have survived than Aetius', some of them reconstructed from long quotations in his opponents' detailed rebuttals. In his *Apology*, Eunomius responds to his critics, and like his teacher cleaves to "unbegotten" as the premier divine name. He offers a "demonstration" (*apodeixis*) that God is, properly understood, unbegotten:

> It is in accordance, therefore, both with innate knowledge [*kata te physikên ennoian*] and the teaching of the fathers that we have made our confession that God is one, that he was brought into being neither by his own action nor by that of any other, for each of these is equally impossible. In fact, just as the maker must be in existence before the things he brings into being, and the thing made must be later than its maker, by the same token a thing cannot exist before or after itself, nor anything else at all before God. (Vaggione 1987: §7, 41)

To ape the language of Anselm, for Eunomius God is that than which nothing can be prior – God is absolute priority. The appeal to "innate knowledge" or "natural concept" (*physikê ennoia*) and the brevity of the demonstration suggests that for Eunomius this understanding of God as absolute priority is self-evidently available to all, effortlessly and instantaneously.

The divine name that captures this self-evident truth is of course "unbegotten," except that "unbegotten" is not a name like other names, for it does not so much capture

a self-evident truth as it *is* the self-evident truth. Other names, including those we regularly apply to God, are merely "in conformity with human invention" (*kat' epinoian anthrôpinên*):

> Expressions based on invention have their existence in name and utterance only, and by their nature are dissolved along with the sounds [which make them up]; but God, whether these sounds are silent, sounding, or have even come into existence, and before anything was created, both was and is unbegotten. (§8, 43)

If "unbegotten" is a name, it is one that does not depend on its ever having been uttered, by us or anyone else, in Greek or in any other language. "Unbegotten" is not our best name for the divine essence; rather, it *is* the divine essence, an "innate knowledge" or "natural concept" entirely "in conformity with reality" (*kata alêtheian*). Our uttering it is our repaying "the debt which above all others is most due God: the acknowledgment that he is what he is" (43). This last phrase recalls the divine autonym from Exodus 3:14, "I am who I am" and thereby suggests that for Eunomius "unbegotten" is, like the Tetragrammaton, a unique signifier that hovers amidst our other signifiers, unsettling and unseating them. And while, unlike the Tetragrammaton, we can pronounce "unbegotten," its truth and force do not depend in the least on our pronunciation of it.

Much as Aetius did before him, Eunomius insists on the essential incomparability of the unbegotten God to the begotten Son and *a fortiori* all subsequent beings: "[God] could never admit of any comparison or association with the thing begotten" (§9, 43). While this God is "himself the cause of the existence of all existing things," he is so at a great remove: "in accordance with his pre-eminence, incomparable in essence, power and authority, he begot and created before all things as Only-Begotten God our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things were made, the image and seal of his own power and action" (§25, 69). The unbegotten God created the begotten Son, with whom God is essentially incomparable. God then seems to recoil from that creation, and creatures are left to relate only to the first-born creation, the Son.

Mortley regards Eunomius as "an important exponent of the *via negativa*" insofar as he and his teacher Aetius struggle to hold in tension both (1) the knowledge of the divine essence as unbegotten and (2) that what it means for God to be unbegotten is that God is utterly transcendent, incomparable and unapproachable (135). In other words, the kataphatic knowledge that God's essence is unbegotten leads to a more radical, apophatic realization, namely that the unbegotten God is unapproachably other. This forecloses any relationship – however paradoxical or impossible – between God and creatures. Hanson says that the hidden assumption in Aetius and Eunomius' thought is that "God cannot communicate himself" (610); Wickham writes that for both of them "there is no knowledge of God by way of mystical communion with his essence" (566). Contrary to Williams's assessment, however, I suspect that they were faithful to Arius' negative theology, so much so that what he says of Arius holds true of them too, namely that God as *agennêtos* amounts to an "inaccessibility of divine 'hinterland,' the mysteriousness of an indefinite source of divinity . . . [an] overplus of 'unengaged' and inexpressible reality" (Williams 242).

Aetius and Eunomius, then, forward an apophatic vision that forecloses any and all relationship with the transcendent God, forecloses any possibility of intimacy with the God who is essentially other – in other words, a vision that forecloses the possibility of mysticism. They are crucial for understanding the development of negative mystical theology precisely because theirs is, so to speak, an apophaticism without mysticism, an astonishingly austere and astringent negative logic that, in the effort to safeguard the transcendence of the one true God, banishes that God from its own creation.

Gregory of Nyssa

We find something very different in Gregory and, after him, in Dionysius. As much as Aetius and Eunomius do, Gregory and Dionysius both confess God as radically other and unknown. But they part ways with Aetius and Eunomius in exploring – indeed insisting on – how we relate intimately with this transcendent God. The intimacy of this encounter is the foundation of their respective mystical theologies. To see whether and how they each balance alterity and intimacy, we will have to look closely at Gregory's *Against Eunomius* and survey Dionysius' entire corpus.

Aetius is said to have once bested Basil of Caesarea in a public debate, and to have decisively bested the bishop, who was then only a deacon (Hanson 601). Perhaps this helps explain the ferocious tone with which Basil's younger brother Gregory of Nyssa attacks Aetius' student Eunomius, likening his writings to a Babylonian baby whom he must brain against the rock of Christ. Recall that Eunomius dismisses human expressions for God that are merely "in conformity with human invention" (*kat' epinoian anthrôpinên*) – in sharp contrast to the name "unbegotten," a "natural concept" or "innate knowledge" (*physikê ennoia*) of God to which we have instant and effortless access. If *ennoia* can mean knowledge, concept, insight, or intuition, *epinoia* has an equally wide spectrum of meanings: from invention or contrivance (*à la* Eunomius) to thinking or intelligence (*à la* Gregory). Eunomius sought to pry *ennoia* away from *epinoia*, to specify a faculty with which we have direct and untroubled access to the divine essence. Gregory resists this disjunction and the notion that any concept, name or faculty can cross the chasm between creature to creator.

Not that we are, in the words of Nietzsche, "straying as through an infinite nothing," because God himself, in the person of Christ, gave us a clue in the baptismal formula: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name (*to onoma*) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). In *Against Eunomius* (Moore and Wilson trans.) Gregory gives a rather creative reading of this formula. "The uncreated nature" – the one essence of the three divine persons – spoke through Christ of a single name or *onoma*, but then "did not add what it is – for how could a name be found for that which is above every name?" (1.2 §3 [103]). The titles Father, Son, and Spirit are not the singular name of God, for there is no such name. But by speaking of a singular name, and then refraining from specifying it, Gregory says that the uncreated nature "gave authority that whatever name our intelligence by pious effort be enabled to discover to indicate the transcendent Nature, that name should be

applied alike to Father, Son, and Spirit" (1.2 §3 [103]). The baptismal formula is in effect an invitation to an intellectual exercise, an invitation issued to the intelligence to discover apt divine names. But it is precisely the invitation to polyonymy (many names) that ensures that we recognize that "the Divine Essence is ineffable and incomprehensible" (1.2 §3 [103]).

Father, Son, and Spirit are not divine names per se, but revealed titles that indicate the relations between the three divine persons. Father connotes Son, and vice versa; Father and Son together connote Spirit. The three constitute a mutually connotative set of titles, but one that is quiet on the matter of the divine essence. Not surprisingly, Gregory focuses on the relationship between Father and Son and acknowledges that some may be led astray by the language of "generation" (I.2 §9 [114]). Such language is a divine accommodation or "stooping" to "our low capacity," the "poverty of human intellect." However poor, the intellect can be trained to "leave behind" the all-too-human connotations of generation, including "time, place, the furnishing of matter, the fitness of instruments, the design in the things that come into being" (I.2 §9 [114]). The language of generation becomes the principal scene of our intellectual and linguistic asceticism: those inappropriately creaturely connotations of generation are progressively "left behind," "excluded," "laid aside," "rejected," and "purged away," so that "the transcendent generation may be clear" (I.2 §9 [114], I.3 §3 [144]). For Gregory, *apophasis* or negation is an exercise performed principally on ourselves, and specifically on our minds and our words – all with the aim of delivering not the divine essence, but the transcendent relationship between the three divine persons who share that single ineffable essence.

It seems that some among the Neo-Arians were using the episode from John 4:19–24 where Jesus meets the Samaritan woman as a weapon against the Nicene profession of ignorance regarding the divine essence. In 4:22 Jesus remarks to the Samaritan woman that "you worship what you do not know; we worship what we know." Gregory seems to be replying to an earlier reading of this remark that would have the Neo-Arians playing Jesus to a Nicene Samaritan woman. Just as the Samaritan woman did not know what she worshipped and was rightly rebuked by Jesus, so too the Nicenes do not know what they worship – that is, they do not know the divine essence – and so are in need of rebuke by the Neo-Arians. Gregory responds by embracing this "ignorance of things incomprehensible": "confessing ourselves inferior to them in the knowledge of those things which are beyond the range of knowledge" (I.3 §5 [147]). He looks to Paul as the premier apostolic ignoramus, who rightly applies to the transcendent God a series of negations, including "unsearchable" and "inscrutable" (Romans 11:33) (I.3 §5 [147]).

Gregory then turns the charge against Eunomius and his ilk: while Gregory may not really *know* what he worships, he really *worships* what he knows. In other words, the God whose essence Gregory does not know is the only God worthy of worship:

> For, as the Samaritans, supposing the Deity to be compassed round by some circumspection of place, were rebuked by the words they heard, "you worship what you do not know," . . . so one might say to the new Samaritans, "In supposing the Deity to be limited by the absence of generation, as it were by some local limit, "you worship what you do not

know," doing service to Him indeed as God, but not knowing that the infinity of God exceeds all the significance and comprehension that names furnish. (I.3 §5 [147])

Aetius and Eunomius are for Gregory the "new Samaritans," who by imposing a limit on God – that the unbegotten God cannot essentially communicate with the begotten Son or even creation – have like the old Samaritans limited God to a remote mountaintop: "For nothing is Divine that is conceived as being circumscribed, but it belongs to the Godhead to be in all places, and to pervade all things, and not to be limited by anything" (147).

This brings us to the crux of the debate between Gregory and Eunomius. What is at stake in this heated exchange and how is it relevant to the development of negative theology? First, let us be clear where they do agree, even if they fail to see this. Gregory and his contemporaries seem to have understood Aetius and Eunomius as confessing a strident confidence in our ability to know the divine essence. And to be fair, the quotations preserved in Epiphanius and Socrates – if indeed they are genuine – could easily be understood in this way. Many scholars have followed suit and regard Aetius and Eunomius as betraying Arius' original impulse to safeguard the transcendence of the one true God by sharply distinguishing unbegotten God from begotten Son. I suspect, however, that Aetius and Eunomius are more loyal to Arius than they may seem *prima facie*, for the divine essence as *agennêtos* or "unbegotten" hardly delivers any kataphatic content, hardly compromises the transcendence of the unbegotten God. On the contrary, knowledge *of* the unbegotten God amounts to knowledge *that* the unbegotten God is unapproachably remote, incomparably other. Gregory makes almost the same point in *Against Eunomius* when he writes: "For such knowledge [of God] [human thought] attains in part by the touch of reason, in part from its very inability to discern it, finding that it is a sort of knowledge to know that what is sought transcends knowledge" (II [264]). For Gregory, reason helps and hinders thought's efforts to know God. But when reason falters and even fails – not by its exclusion but by its exhaustion – thought discovers that the knowledge it attains is the knowledge that the God whom it is seeking is beyond knowledge.

The ambiguity in the word "beyond," however, marks the crucial difference between Gregory and Eunomius, in spite of their similarly apophatic epistemologies. For in Eunomius' efforts to preserve an essential chasm between the unbegotten God and the begotten Son, his God threatens to twist away and spiral off into an inaccessible obsolescence – what Williams calls "a kind of divine 'hinterland'" (242). This threat Gregory perceives and actively resists. In his reading of John 14:22 and the Samaritan woman, Gregory makes clear that he regards any transcendental exile as a limitation falsely imposed on an unlimited God, the only God worthy of worship. If what we worship is in fact God, an unlimited God, then "it belongs to the Godhead to be in all places, and to pervade all things, and not to be limited by anything" (I.3 §5 [147]). This commits Gregory to the view that – impossibly – the God with whom we relate is a God we cannot know. The distance between creator and creature is maintained only as it is crossed: only because God is unlimited can God relate to us, and we to God.

If for Eunomius "beyond" signals some distant, inaccessible realm, for Gregory it signals the excess on offer in what is most near:

> Whatever be the nature of God, He is not to be apprehended by sense, and He transcends reason, though human thought, busying itself with curious inquiry, with such help of reason as it can command, stretches out its hand and just touches His unapproachable and sublime nature, being neither keen-sighted enough to see clearly what is invisible, nor yet so far withheld from approach as to be unable to catch some faint glimpse of what it seeks to know. (II, 264)

This promise of a brushing touch or faint glimpse of the divine is what distinguishes Gregory and, after him, Dionysius the Areopagite from Aetius and Eunomius. What hangs in the balance is mysticism – the promise of an extraordinary, immediate encounter with the transcendent God. For Aetius and Eunomius, there is a radical negative theology, but no mysticism. But Gregory wants both distance and proximity, alterity and intimacy.

Dionysius the Areopagite

The *Corpus Dionysiacum* [hereafter *CD*] appeared on the scene in early sixth-century Syria. It presents itself as the literary remains of the first-century Athenian convert, Dionysius, member of the court of the Areopagus, from Acts 17. Since the end of the nineteenth century, scholars have (nearly universally) acknowledged that the *CD* is very much influenced by late Platonism – especially by Proclus, head of the Academy in Athens in the late fifth century – and thus must be a pseudonymous work from the late fifth or early sixth century. Despite the fact that the author often speaks in an unveiled Neoplatonic idiom, the *CD* was soon embraced by sixth-century readers as a genuinely sub-apostolic collection and esteemed accordingly. It is most famous for its negative theology and its view of the angels and the church as constituting two halves of a single "hierarchy" – a word he coins.

Dionysius confesses God to be "beyond being" (*hyperousios*) and "unknown" (*agnostos*). The first adjective is a commonplace from Neoplatonic metaphysics: the One, properly speaking, *is* not, that is, it does not exist, but exceeds beyond (*hyper*) being (*ousios*). The second adjective "unknown" can be seen to follow from the first, namely that a God who exceeds beyond being cannot be an object of knowledge, for knowledge is always and only knowledge of beings. But this second adjective also derives from Paul's famous speech to the court of the Areopagus in Acts 17, where he addresses a crowd saying, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17: 22–23). A God who exceeds beyond being such that we cannot know him – this would seem to repeat Aetius and Eunomius' exile of the unbegotten God. And yet this is not the case. Later in this same speech Paul says that God has arranged creation "so that [we] should seek God, in the hope that [we] might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'in him we live and move and have our being'" (17: 27–28). True to his pseudonymous identity, Dionysius

follows Paul and imagines an order of the world according to which all beings can seek and find the unknown God beyond being. But how?

The unknown God beyond being calls all beings into existence and differentiates them. Some beings have reason, for example, while others do not. Those that do have reason – the angels and humans (leaving aside the troublesome business of demons) – are organized into a hierarchy or holy order. What distinguishes the celestial hierarchy from the ecclesiastical hierarchy is their respective share of intellect and sense. The angels are purely intelligible beings, while humans are a hybrid, intelligible and sensible. When the unknown God discloses Godself to angels, God accommodates to their intellects, which are free of any distractions from the senses. Likewise when God discloses Godself to humans, God accommodates to our intellects and our senses, with the latter often clouding the former.

Throughout both the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies, Dionysius tells us, the light of Christ shines (see Heil and Ritter, *Celestial Hierarchy*: *CH* 1.1, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: *EH* 1.1). In other words, the unknown God illuminates his hierarchical creation with his own light. This is no derivative God, no second-order effulgence, who is on offer to beings. Rather, Christ – the Incarnate Son fully *homoousios* with the Father – is himself *hyperousios* or "beyond being":

> Jesus Himself – the most supremely Divine Mind and beyond being (*hyperousios*), the Source and Essence, and most supremely Divine Power of every Hierarchy and Sanctification and Divine operation – illuminates the blessed Beings who are superior to us, in a manner more clear, and at the same time more intellectual, and assimilates them to His own Light, as far as possible. (*EH* 1.1, Parker 68)

But Christ cannot appear to us or to the angels ("the blessed Beings who are superior to us") as he really is – or rather, is *not* – but must veil his light in symbols, be they intelligible or sensible symbols. For humans, Christ's symbolic self-disclosure is principally in the scriptures – especially the "divine names" contained therein – and in the sacraments of the liturgy. And so in the *Celestial Hierarchy* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* Dionysius exhorts the reader to contemplate these scriptural and liturgical symbols, to ascend through their sensible and then intelligible meanings, but all with the ultimate aim of vaulting over both sensible and intelligible meanings and basking in the unadorned light of Christ, meeting the unknown God as unknown.

In *Celestial Hierarchy* 2, Dionysius famously recommends crass or absurd symbols as the most productive sites for contemplation. The problem with the more rarefied, intelligible symbols – divine names like "Word," "Mind" or "Being" – is that they are likely to dupe contemplatives into thinking that God really is what they symbolically signify. If this were to happen, the symbol would cease working as a symbol and would devolve into an idol. But some symbols – like the divine names "worm" or "drunk" – are so crass and absurd that they do not "permit our earthly part to rest fixed in these base images, but urge the upward tendency of the soul, and goad it by the unseemliness of the phrases (to see) that it belongs neither to lawful nor seeming truth, even for the most earthly conceptions, that the most heavenly and divine visions are actually like things

so base" (*CH* 2.4, Parker 9). These symbols are not set apart from other symbols because they are somehow both similar and dissimilar to God. In fact, every symbol insofar as it is a veil is both similar and dissimilar to God – "Word" no less than "worm." But certain symbols are privileged because of what work they do *on us*, how they help us push past all sensible and intelligible meanings and encounter the unknown light of Christ beyond being.

Recall that in his exchange with Eunomius over John 4, Gregory embraced his "ignorance of things incomprehensible" and looked to Paul as the premier apostolic ignoramus. Like Gregory, Dionysius says that when we receive the light of Christ shorn of its veils, we "unknow" the unknown God. In other words, the unknown God cannot be an object of knowledge, even if its symbolic veils can be. But if we peel back these veils, what we experience is "unknowing" (*agnôsia*), a union with the unknown God beyond being.[4] Dionysius looks to Paul for this insight as well. In his speech to the court of the Areopagus, Paul says, "what you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). The "as unknown" here is mistranslated; the circumstantial participle *agnoountes* refers to the Athenians themselves and so should be translated "unknowingly" or "ignorantly." But Dionysius can just as easily, and legitimately, read this line to mean, "I proclaim to you that which you worship *through unknowing*." With this subtle shift, Dionysius can regard Paul as the apostolic ignoramus not only in the sense that he does not confess to know of God more than he does or can – which is how Gregory figures Paul – but also in the sense of one who thinks we rightly worship the unknown God by attaining to a mystical unknowing.

The governing exhortation of the *CD* is to *receive*, that is, to receive the light of Christ that is on offer to all beings through the hierarchy. As I have said, this light is and must be veiled, but the practice of negative theology is the practice of contemplating these veils or symbols and receiving the light of Christ as it is, or indeed *is* not, beyond the veils, beyond being. The goal of negative theology is therefore pure receptivity, and to receive purely is to be deified. Dionysius describes this deifying receptivity with a number of figures, but one of his favorites is a phrase of Pauline inspiration. In his letters, Paul refers to some of his confreres as *sunergoi theou* – "co-workers" or "cooperators" with God. Dionysius takes up this vocabulary and describes our progressive reception of the light of Christ as our *sunergeia theou*, our "synergy" or "cooperation" with God whereby the light is the *energeia* or "energy" with which we cooperate.

This cooperation is not some sort of parallel play, in which we are kept safely distinct from the divine energy that is always on offer, always working around us even if we fail to perceive or receive it. Rather, cooperation as receptivity means that we consent to have the divine energy, the light of Christ who is "beyond being," enter into us – in fact, to shine through us, so to speak, "from above" – that is, from the next superior rank in the hierarchy – and "from below" – that is, from the next inferior rank in the hierarchy. According to this model, which owes much to the Neoplatonic accounts of the cosmos as simultaneously proceeding from (*proodos*) and returning to (*epistrophê*) its source, to receive the light of Christ is to consent to have the light of Christ shine *through* us, in two directions. In other words, to receive the gift of God is to receive it only to give it away to our superiors and inferiors. To receive, to cooperate, to be deified is to become a conduit of the divine energy, a glass through which the light shines less and less darkly.

Just as Paul is for Dionysius the apostolic ignoramus who teaches us how we may only encounter the unknown God through "unknowing," so too Paul is the apostolic witness to the intimate indwelling of the light of Christ. In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius writes of the apostle:

> Wherefore also, Paul the Great, when possessed by the divine love, and participating in its ecstatic power, says with inspired lips, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). As a true lover, and beside himself (*exestêkôs*), as he says, to Almighty God (2 Corinthians 5:13), and not living the life of himself, but the life of the beloved, as a life excessively esteemed.

Dionysius takes his confession from Galatians 2:20 as evidence that Paul consented to have the light of Christ enter into him, and displace him. Thereafter Paul leads a split existence, being still Paul but also having Christ live in (and through) him. As evidence for this split existence, Dionysius looks to 2 Corinthians 5:13, where Paul says that "if we are beside ourselves (*exestêmen*), it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you." For Dionysius, the ecstasy Paul speaks of here, his being beside himself for God, is the ecstasy of the indwelling of the light of Christ.

The contrast between Dionysius' mysticism and the negative theology of Aetius and Eunomius is, I hope, very clear by now. Dionysius, following his creative reading of Paul, confesses an unknown God whom we can only encounter in and through "unknowing." But whereas for Aetius and Eunomius the transcendence of the unbegotten God necessitates God's exile from creation, for Dionysius we are invited, indeed exhorted, to encounter the unknown God, more or less everywhere. The light of Christ is the fully divine light that is, like its ineffable source, beyond being (*hyperousios*), and that offers itself to us veiled in the scriptures and the liturgy. The practice of negative theology is the practice of receiving this light and progressively penetrating through these veils until the unadorned and unknown light dwells in us, and passes through us. Thus the pinnacle of Dionysian negative theology is not distance and exile, but intimacy and homecoming. God, who is ultimately other, is most "godlike" when God crosses the chasm between creator and creature, beyond being and being, unknown and known, and resides in the receiving self of an ecstatic subject.

Conclusion

This essay has not attempted to chart comprehensively the development of negative theology from Gregory of Nyssa in the late fourth century to Dionysius the Areopagite in the early sixth century. Rather, it has focused on the heated exchange between Gregory and Eunomius (drawing on Aetius) to show how the fourth century offered up two options for Christian negative theology. The first, represented by Aetius and Eunomius, safeguarded the transcendence of God by insisting on an infinite and unbridgeable distance between God and creation – a transcendental exile, if you will. The second, represented by Gregory, regarded any insistence on God's transcendental distance as itself a false limitation imposed on an unlimited God. For Gregory, the transcendence

of God implied God's immanence, indeed intimacy with creation – a brushing touch or faint glimpse of a God whose essence remains always ineffable. The first regarded a mystical encounter with God as impossible; the second regarded an impossible and intimate encounter as necessary if God is to be God. This exchange and its resulting two options for negative theology then help us appreciate some of the force of Dionysius' negative theology in the early sixth century. Dionysius can be seen to push Gregory's instincts further: he ratchets up God's transcendence to the point that our only knowledge of the unknown God "beyond being" is a mystical unknowing *and* he insists that we "unknow" this God by receiving the divine light – also "beyond being" – into our very selves. God is distant in that God is always beyond being but intimate in that God as Christ takes up residence in us, as Christ did in Paul according to Galatians 2:20. For Dionysius, negative theology is simply the practice of soliciting the intimate indwelling of the God beyond being.

Rowan Williams discerns the "crucial difference" in what becomes normative negative theology to be its insistence that the "energy of conceptual negation is bound up with a sense of intimate involvement in the life of God, rather than absolute disjunction" (243). For Williams,

> the apophatic moment in our theology . . . means that the divine natures cannot be abstracted from God's active relationship with the world. And since that relationship, in which the theologian as believer is caught up, is not susceptible of being distanced and exhaustively defined, neither is God's nature. [God's] everlasting act is as little capable of being a determinate object of our minds as the wind in our faces and lungs can be held still as distant in front of our eyes. (243)

Between Dionysius and the explosive transformation of negative theology in modernity, this characterization holds true. After the Areopagite, and following Gregory's riposte to Eunomius and Aetius, negative theology regards the transcendent God as intimately involved in our lives as the breath in our lungs – or perhaps better, regards the breath in our lungs as transcendently divine as any distant god we presume to imagine and keep at a safe distance.

Notes

1   I wish to make clear that I am not championing "orthodoxy" over "heresy." I am not arguing that the emerging orthodoxy triumphed over the competing "heresies" because it was more "mystical." The causes for the triumph of what we now retrospectively label "orthodoxy" over "heresy" are many, and run the range from the sublime to the ridiculous, and often linger in the quotidian middle.

2   There is a lively debate as to whether or not to label Aetius and Eunomius "Neo-Arians." At issue here is how continuous their concerns and commitments were with Arius'. I am inclined to see them as quite loyal to Arius' principal concern – safeguarding the one transcendent God – even if their theological method differs from his considerably. In short, I am more comfortable with the "Neo-Arian" label than many contemporary scholars are. But in an effort to be fair to this debate, and to let Aetius and Eunomius speak for

themselves, I have refrained, as much as possible, from saddling them with the baggage of the early fourth-century Arian controversy.

3   I have modified Wickham's translation of Aetius slightly to render it consistent with Vaggione's translation of Eunomius. While Wickham translates *agennêtos* as "ingenerate," I translate it as "unbegotten."

4   Dionysius is the not the first to characterize this encounter between knowing creatures and the transcendent God as "unknowing": the anonymous commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*, sometimes attributed to Porphyry, also says that our only knowledge of the One is *agnôsia*.

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Syriac Mysticism

Brian E. Colless

The Syriac East, or the Syrian Orient, as distinct from the Latin west (Roman Catholic) and the Hellenic east (Greek Orthodox), is where the Syriac language is used in liturgy and literature. Syriac is the Christian dialect of Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke in Galilee. Aramaic is closely related to Hebrew, and both are found together at various points in the Bible (Genesis 31:47, for example, and in the books of Daniel and Ezra), and also in the Jewish Talmud. Aramaic was the native tongue of the wandering Arameans, who settled in what is now Syria, with Damascus as their capital city. Their language became the international means of diplomatic exchange between nations in the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires, right into the Christian era. The Roman Empire used Greek for this purpose, and so the literati of the Syriac world were exposed to Greek influence, and they knew both languages. The Syriac Christians were divided into two ecclesiastical groups: *West Syrians* (Syrian Orthodox Church) and *East Syrians* (Church of the East, known to outsiders as "the Nestorian church," and they now call themselves "Assyrian Christians"). They were sojourners in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia, the lands now bearing the names Syria, Iraq, and Iran; but their hermitages, monasteries, and churches were also located in southeastern Turkey, Arabia, India, Central Asia, and China. The notable cities of this area are Edessa (Urhai, now Urfa in Turkey) and Nisibis, both between the rivers Euphrates and the Tigris in northern Mesopotamia; other towns attached to the names of some of the monks and bishops are Mabbug and Apamea in Syria, and Nineveh (now Mosul in Iraq) on the Tigris. The period covered here is from the fourth century to the eighth century of the Christian era.[1]

The Way of Christ

There are various definitions of mysticism in this volume, but in my book on Syriac mysticism, entitled *The Wisdom of the Pearlers* (Colless 2008), I failed to define the term

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(though it was explained in the glossary at the end). This time, so that we will know from the outset what we are talking about (or not talking about, see below) here is a definition: *mysticism refers to religious experience involving a non-rational encounter with ultimate divine reality, which imparts a sense of unity.* Some mystics (Buddhist monks, for example) might omit the word "divine," and others (such as Christian spiritual adepts) would include "love" in the mixture, but all would probably speak of "bliss" and "ecstasy." For Christian mystics it involves the "imitation of Christ," the True Living Way (John 14:6), and the term "the way of Christ" (attested in Syriac literature) is applicable to the path that will be described here.

How do we start? Do I throw the whole mass of the names of the Syriac mystics at the reader (who then stops reading, and moves on to the next chapter)? Or do I deliver a complete mess of technical terms such as "impassibility," "eschatology," "apophaticism," and "ineffability" (and the eyes glaze over or panic sets in)? Well, the word "ineffable" is routinely applied to mystical experience, and we certainly need to know that it means "unutterable, too sublime to be described in speech"; and also "inexpressible, too mysterious to be expressed in words"; and sometimes it implies prohibition of utterance, to keep the secret knowledge away from the eyes and ears of the uninitiated.

Accordingly, it seems that we should hold our tongue and be silent since the monks we are meeting here enjoin silence, stillness, and solitude on us. The great Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), revered in western and eastern Christendom alike, exclaimed, before falling silent, "I became lost in you, and speechless; glory to you, hidden Being" (*Hymns on Faith* 32).[2]

Paradoxically, the ecstatic person might break the silence and burst into intimate conversation with the Beloved, and cry out in excitement. The eighth-century monk John of Dalyatha heard a monastic brother (though he may be referring modestly to himself) babbling and bubbling in a state of intoxication with Christ's love; as the divine glory shone forth in his heart, he exclaimed: "O my God, how thy love inflames," and "O thine unspeakable beauty," and "other things of an outspoken kind that should not be passed on in writing, or else I will come under censure from the initiated for daring to reveal the unwritten mysteries, while being considered by the weak to be raving mad" (*Discourse On Charity and Love*).[3] Here the divine beauty is said to be ineffable and indescribable, while the revealed mysteries are not to be published outside the circle of the initiated. Elsewhere, John of Dalyatha declares, with reference to the *ineffable* "sweetness" of communion with God, that "those who have not experienced it can never have it communicated to them through words" (Letter 7.2); and he mentions "mysteries, revelations, intellections about the Divine Essence" as "things one is not permitted to reveal" (Letter 4.5).

Another reason for keeping such writings under wraps was to prevent heresy-hunting bishops from scrutinizing them. John's essays were in fact published by his brother, and they were banned because of some suspect ideas found in them; but they continued to circulate widely, though not under his name, and they were translated into many languages; a few of his discourses penetrated Europe, embedded in the works of Isaac the Syrian (Isaac of Nineveh).

A concise summary of how the mystic approaches God, and what God does in response, is provided by the seventh-century monk Sahdona, alias Martyrios (his Syriac

and Greek names both mean "witness") in his *Book of Perfection* (2.8.19–20).[4] He tells us that prayer should be an interior offering of the heart, after the heart has been purified of passions; it must be an oblation pleasing to God, without blemish, accompanied by attentiveness and tears; in return God will send "the *fire* of his Spirit" to consume our sacrifice, and raise our minds to heaven in the flames. "Then we shall behold the Lord, to our delight and not to our destruction, as the stillness of his revelation falls upon us, and the hidden things of the knowledge of him are portrayed in us; our hearts will be given spiritual joy, together with hidden mysteries which I am unable to disclose in words to the simple" (2.8.20). An analysis of this sublime utterance will carry us further towards an understanding of the mystical path, the way of Christ. In presenting the features of the system, we will concentrate on its basis in the Bible, as the Syriac writers certainly do. The path commences with repentance, passes through reformation to revelation, and ultimately to resurrection; but the "eternal life" of the post-resurrection existence may be enjoyed mystically by a purified person who is in this world but not of this world.

Purification and Perception

When the heart has been purified of passions, we shall behold the Lord, Martyrios declares. The scriptural reference is patent, pointing us to the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"* (Matthew 5:8), and elsewhere in the *Book of Perfection* he actually quotes it (2.8.47). At this point the reader should be fully awake and attentive to the statement I am about to make: *On this foundation the whole of Syriac Christian mysticism is built*. We see it first in fourth-century exponents of eastern spirituality.

Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), in his commentary on the Diatessaron (harmony of the four Gospels), in the section on the Beatitudes (6.1a) quotes it thus: *"Blessed are those who are pure in their heart for they shall see God"*; then he refers to the "prophet" (or psalmist) praying, "Create in me a pure heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10); he adds that those whose heart is pure shall see God as Moses did; he does not elaborate on this, but presumably he means beholding "the form of the Lord" (Numbers 12:8) or his "back" but not his "face" (Exodus 33:20), though Moses was said to be permitted to talk with God "face to face," as with a friend (Exodus 33:11). Ephrem concludes, "As a pure (or clean) eye is able to look at the rays of the sun, so a pure soul may receive a vision of its Lord."[5] Likewise, Aphrahat the Persian Sage (d. c. 345), a monk and bishop in Iran, says in his *Demonstrations* (6.1): "Let us purify our heart of iniquity, so that we may see the Lofty One in his glory," and "behold the King in his beauty" (Isaiah 33:17).[6]

This beatitude of purification (Matthew 5:8) occurs frequently in an anonymous collection of thirty sermons on Christian perfection, conventionally known as *The Book of Steps*; it dates from the fourth century, the time of Adelphios of Edessa (who met Saint Antony the Great and other monks of the Egyptian desert [see Chapter 10, this volume]), and it was possibly authored by him, as it contains some of the things for which Adelphios was declared to be heretical: emphasis on perfection, and necessity of fervent prayer for exorcising one's indwelling demons and for achieving "impassibility"

(Syriac "non-passionateness," Greek *apatheia*, not apathy but passionlessness, being without concupiscence, like Adam before he sinned).[7] In one instance (Discourse 12:7) the purity beatitude is brought together with the Psalmist's affirmation that the person who has "clean hands and a pure heart" will ascend the mountain of the Lord and stand in his holy place (Psalm 24:3–5); for that preacher, this sacred place is the celestial church which is open to those who have fought against Satan and defeated him. Thus, mysticism goes with asceticism, that is, "exercises" for spiritual benefit, involving austerity, abstinence, self-discipline, battling against evil demons, and resisting the passions and temptations they arouse.

Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523), a west Syrian bishop, was a critic of Adelphios as being extreme and deluded, and the inventor of the heresy of the Messallians ("the praying"), sectarians who emphasized intense prayer as the only way to expel demons from one's soul. Philoxenos tells the story of Adelphios to his inquirer Patriq (or Patrikios or Patricius), who is looking for a short and painless route to the beatific vision; Philoxenos insists that Patriq can *not* bypass all the ascetic practices, and can *not* avoid keeping the commandments virtuously, if he wishes to attain "spiritual contemplation" (*theoria*). "In one of the beatitudes he has given us, which are also commandments, he has told us this: *Blessed are those who are pure in their heart, for they shall see God*"; and "purity of heart brings a person to vision of God"; but "he has not allowed us to ask for it" (*Letter to Patriq*, 108–110, 122).[8] His passing remark that the Beatitudes are also commandments is striking.

The most illustrious and yet the most humble of the Syriac mystics, was John of Dalyatha, who lived in the eighth century; but his name is not usually found in manuscripts of his work, as his writings were banned by the east Syrian Patriarch Timothy I (780–823) for alleged Messallianism and for statements he made about beholding God, together with the writings of Joseph Hazzaya (alias Abdisho Hazzaya) and John of Apamea (who became John the Solitary). If the excommunicated Adelphios had been the author of *The Book of Steps* (which contains ideas associated with the Messallians) his name would have been deleted for a similar reason, so that his valuable work could be preserved. Be that as it may, John "the holy old man" (*saba qadisha*) makes frequent use of the purity beatitude, though he had his own wording for it: *"Blessed are those who are pure in their heart, for in their heart they shall see God"* (Letter 19:7). To a brother he said: "If you are determined to advance along the way of humility of your Lord . . . and with him and through him draw near to his Father (John 14:6), that is, see the glory of his Greatness in your soul for its delight, then walk according to the example he has shown you . . . He has said, I am the Way (John 14:6)." Moreover, with the backing of Evagrios Pontikos (d. 399), John declares that it is necessary to engage in combat with Satan and the demons, as Christ did in the wilderness, in order to "acquire the purity that beholds God" (Letter on humility, 1–2; Hansbury 259).

In Sahdona's *Book of Perfection*, after quoting the purity beatitude he added: "Let us incline our ear towards him, and purify our hearts with his words, so that we may hear his living voice with the ears of our minds, and behold his great beauty *with the eyes of our hearts*" (2.8.47). The emphasized phrase is important, as the vision of Divinity is not supposed to be with the physical eyes. As John of Dalyatha and others have said, the soul or the heart is a *mirror* which must be cleaned of all dross, that is, purified, or

polished (copper mirrors needed cleaning to reflect images more clearly) so that God's glory may be reflected in it: "He does indeed reveal himself to the few who firmly fix their gaze within themselves, those who make themselves a *mirror* in which the Unseen One is seen . . . according to the testimony of the Word of God: *Blessed are the pure, for in their heart they shall see God*" (Matthew 5:8, but not an exact quotation) (Letter 14.2). "Purify your *mirror* and in it the singular light will be shown to you triunely without division" (Letter 28.2). "Happy the soul that knows it is a *mirror*, gazing into itself and seeing the splendour of the One who is hidden from all. He who said on the mountain, *No man shall see me and live* (Exodus 33:20), is seen in that place, and those who see him live for ever" (Letter 7.3). Remember what Sahdona-Martyrios said: "we shall behold the Lord, to our delight and not to our destruction."

The origin of this mirror imagery is with the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 13:12), as *The Book of Steps* (18.2–3) demonstrates. The writer says that when we have cleared away our external sins and are doing good deeds, it is time to struggle against "the sin that dwells within us." This is an obvious reference to Paul's conflict with himself (Romans 7:17, "the sin dwelling in me"), but this kind of talk was regarded as Messallian by the bishops, from the fourth century onwards, especially when it is associated with claims of being perfect and sinless, and with the idea that prayer alone (not the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist) can release a person from bondage to indwelling sin, or to Satan. "We must strive to be without sins, and entreat our Lord to save us from sin" (18.2). We need to pray as Jesus did, with much groaning and many tears, for "he was heard and made perfect" (see Hebrews 5:7–9), and he set an example for us. Of course, one of his commandments in the Sermon on the Mount is "Be perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The vision of God in the pure heart and the mirror are combined thus (18.3): "As it is written: Blessed are those who are pure in their heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:8); in this world, as Paul said, we see our Lord with *the eyes of our heart as in a mirror*, but in that world, face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Stages and States

The best-known division of the mystical path, recognized in both eastern and western Christendom, is based on the principle of purification enabling perception: it is the doctrine of "the three ways," namely *purgation*, *illumination*, and *unification*; this pattern is found in a set of spiritual treatises published under the name of Dionysios the Areopagite (see Chapter 11, this volume).[9] Although this system is obviously related to the purity beatitude (Matthew 5:8), this defining utterance is never quoted. The author was a pseudo-Dionysios, not really the Areopagite converted by Paul in Athens (Acts 17:34). He was a west Syrian mystic who wrote in Greek, and his work was translated into Syriac. He lived in the time of Severos of Antioch (d. 538), who was possibly but not probably the author; he was presumably a monk; he was certainly a Neoplatonist theologian. In his view, the universe was *hierarchical* (hence his discourses on *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*) and also *triadic*; accordingly, his mystical scheme was an *ascent*, and divided into *three* sections, which we may list under an alternative designation: (1) *Purification*, (2) *Illumination*, (3) *Union*.

The brief tract entitled *The Mystical Theology* gives an outline of the Pseudo-Dionysian system (but without specifically mentioning the three ways). He begins with a prayer, and its first word is triadic: "Trinity!" He then addresses his "friend" Timothy, and this is presumably meant to be the same Timothy who received two epistles from Paul, in which God is described as "dwelling in light unapproachable, whom no one has seen, nor can see" (1 Timothy 6:16). This is mentioned at the beginning of his Letter 5 (to Dorotheos the deacon): "The divine darkness is that unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell." Again, in his paradoxical manner, he asserts that when the soul is divinized (deification through union with Divinity), the perception of the rays of "unapproachable light" is sightless and unknowing (*Divine Names* 4.11). His advice for achieving mystical experience is to leave everything, abandon self, and strive upwards to union with the one who is beyond all being and knowledge (*Mystical Theology* 1.1).

Timothy is urged to ensure that none of this teaching is revealed to the uninitiated, who are wrapped up in themselves and in the things of the world (1.2). This is an example of secretiveness; and, with regard to "apophaticism," Dionysios also speaks of negations and affirmations, referring to the apophatic way, as opposed to the cataphatic way. In negative or apophatic theology, every name must be eliminated, as all human concepts and images are inadequate for describing God. Incidentally, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) was an early exponent of apophatic theology (Miscellanies, Book 5), and so he may be "the philosopher Clement" that Dionysios mentions (*Divine Names* 5.9) (see Chapter 9, this volume).

The first step is purification (or purgation), but Dionysios does not invoke the beatitude of the pure heart; instead he uses the story of Moses on the mountain (Exodus 19–20) to illustrate the ascent of the soul. Moses sanctifies himself (purgation) and separates himself from the people. The next step (illumination) is when he hears trumpets and sees lightning. The final state (perfect union) is attained in the cloud on the mountain top, and involves plunging into "the darkness of unknowing" (the proverbial "cloud of unknowing"), and by renouncing all the mind's conceptions one is supremely united through non-knowledge, knowing nothing. Paradoxical indeed.

Pseudo-Dionysios also has a tripartite division of the spiritual life, correlating with the three stages of mystical ascent: (1) *novitiate* (beginners, novices, catechumens), purification stage; (2) *intermediate*, experiencing illumination; (3) *perfection*, the perfect in divine union (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, chs. 5–6).

Another system of three levels or orders (*taxis*) was propounded by John the Solitary,[10] or John of Apamea (in Syria), in the fifth century: (1) The *somatical* (or corporeal) aspect relates to the body; (2) the *psychical* concerns the soul, the psyche; (3) the *pneumatical* (or spiritual) is about the spirit. This corresponds to the tripartite division of a person found in a benediction of the Apostle Paul: "May your spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). This paradigm also resembles Paul's three classes of Christians in 1 Corinthians: "fleshly" (*sarkikos*, carnal, 3:3), "soulish" (*psukhikos*, natural, sensual, 2:14); "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*, 2:15), but the correspondence is not exact.

Each stage has a characteristic state. The *somatical* state is impurity, the natural human condition, but a person may rise above this by repentance and "corporeal practice," which is asceticism for taming the body, involving fasting, vigil, and detachment

from the world. Next comes the internal struggle against the passions, in solitude and quietness, with tears and prayers; through these practices the monk achieves a state of "purity" (*dakhyutha*), and eventually another kind of purity (*shaphyutha)*, which encompasses serenity, limpidity, luminosity, and transparency. The person in the pneumatical stage will engage in contemplation and pure continual prayer, and pass on into perfection, but not in this life. His illustration of the process is a pilgrim traveling to a city, over rough ground (the ascetic exercises) then across a plain (the state of serenity) to the magnificent city (which represents perfection, in the celestial realm).

A short treatise *On the Spiritual Order (Taxis) of the Soul* contains the teaching of John of Apamea, though it is attributed in the manuscript tradition to John of Lykopolis (one of the Desert Fathers) or to John the Seer (Hazzaya).[11] It describes the heights of mystical experience in the *spiritual* stage and state, beyond the *corporeal* and *psychical*; and its various facets will be presented here in summary.

In the *spiritual* state, the soul has achieved *purity,* and has the original pure sight it possessed before it transgressed the commandment; freed from all passions and demons it experiences *serenity*; it attains contemplation of the Holy Trinity in *quietude*; and pure *prayer* is the soul standing serenely with nothing from the world disturbing it. Two signs of *humility* in the soul are: meditating on the Passion of Christ leads to imitation of Christ in not seeking vengeance on enemies; and gazing at the greatness and incomprehensibility of God makes it so humble that it wishes to be placed beneath the whole of creation, on account of its wonder and amazement over his unspeakable majesty. With regard to spiritual *hunger*, the *food* of the soul is the sight of God and contemplation of things that are above the physical senses; the *fasting* of the soul means weaning itself off all evil passions and impure desires. The *joy* of the soul is like a child rejoicing with tears of gladness when it sees its mother approaching; the soul that is in *spiritual serenity* exults and weeps with sweet delight at the sight of the Bridegroom Christ; and like a virgin bride it shows *modesty* in his presence. The *love* of the soul is about being absorbed and bound in the *love* and *affection* of God; as the rising of the sun draws back the veil of darkness covering the creation and reveals its beauty, so when the love and light of Christ dawns in the soul the hidden things in it now become visible. At this point John of Apamea introduces an image that recurs in eastern and western mysticism, namely the union of iron and fire: when iron is placed in the fire it is united with it and assumes its likeness and colour, and when the living fire of Christ enters the soul, it burns away the thorns of sin, and the soul becomes new and alive and the likeness of its nature is changed into the likeness of God; and as Christ in his love sacrificed himself on the cross of Golgotha, the soul becomes absorbed in love for all humankind and would gladly die if they could be saved by its death. Finally, all the things of this world are contrary to *the Way of Christ*. An infant in the womb is not able to see the world, and the true light of *the Way of Christ* is concealed from the mind when it is bound by the things of this world; when a babe emerges from the womb it sees the world through the light of the sun and grows in knowledge; similarly, when a person is born from the physical realm into the spiritual realm he sees spiritual things, while growing in spiritual knowledge.

The tripartite schema of John of Apamea (in the fifth century) was taken up by later mystics, and used in various ways. The important point to keep in mind is that for John

the corporeal (somatic) order is not part of the mystical path, but it is the normal human state; an alternative doctrine made it a stage that had to be entered.

Isaac of Nineveh (the seventh-century east Syrian monk and bishop, whose writings were translated into Greek and published under the name Isaac the Syrian, to cover his Nestorian connection) combines the Johannine framework (body, soul, spirit) with the Pseudo-Dionysian categories. For example, in a treatise on faith and knowledge (Discourse 51, On the three degrees of knowledge), the first stage of knowledge is concerned with love for the *body*; the second or *intermediate* degree involves *psychical* love; the third is the degree of *perfection* and *spirituality*. He also speaks of the states of *purity* and *serenity* (including clarity and luminosity of vision) as the goals of ascetic labours.[12]

John of Dalyatha did not use the Apamean categories systematically, but he followed the Pseudo-Dionysian paradigm (purification, illumination, union), together with the separation of beginners (novices), intermediates, and perfect; the cloud of light and unknowing also feature prominently in his writings. However, the technical terms for "purity" and "serenity" occur often enough. In his discourse "On the visitations bestowed on monks," he has three stages of the blessings imparted by grace, and the description of each is given a title (though these may have been added by an editor, and there are variants in the manuscripts): (1) Visitation of the first stage (that is, of beginners); (2) The middle stage (that is, psychicity); (3) On the stage of perfection. Here the Dionysian classification of monks is seen: beginners, intermediates, and perfect. The Apamean categories are represented by "psychicity" in the second title, and "serenity" is mentioned in the third section, and also the idea of being "perfected."[13]

Joseph Hazzaya (the Visionary), an east Syrian monk of the eighth century, elaborated this scheme in a letter on the three degrees.[14] He describes the monastic and mystic path by citing aspects of the experience of the Israelites under Moses and Joshua: in the exodus from Egypt, the entry into Canaan, the conquest of the Canaanites, and the settlement in the promised land. The exodus corresponds to the renunciation of the world, after repentance, and entry into a monastery. The novice is tempted by a demon, who sets before him all the advantages of life in the world, and here it is like the murmuring of the Israelites against Moses, as they hankered for the food they had eaten in Egypt; the cure for the affliction caused by the serpent-demon's insinuations is gazing at the crucified Christ, as the people looked at the bronze serpent to obtain healing from snake-bite. This is the *somatical* stage, which is characterized by humility and obedience (as Christ humbled himself and was obedient, in suffering death on the cross), poverty, self-denial, vigils, silence, and being mindful of God. The Israelites were living under the Ten Commandments; and the novice obeys the monastic rule. He will experience tears, sometimes from sadness, sometimes from joy. The fruit of the exercises in the corporeal stage in the monastery is the state of *purity.*

Joseph Hazzaya now takes us into the *psychical* stage: the act of leaving the monastery and taking up residence in a private cell corresponds to crossing the Jordan and settling in the promised land. In solitude and silence the monk reads the Scriptures and writings of the Fathers. Manual work is not obligatory but voluntary; it can relieve boredom, as Saint Antony learned; it can make the monk more self-sufficient, and thus avoid having to leave the sanctuary of his cell and go into the village, connecting with people, thereby disrupting his solitude. There are visitations of divine grace, as

with John of Dalyatha. However, as the Israelites were confronted by the seven nations already inhabiting Canaan, the solitary is assailed by various demons, each of which is associated with a particular passion or weakness. These include the eight evil thoughts (*logismoi*) promulgated in the Egyptian desert by the monk named Evagrios Pontikos (died 399): (1) gluttony (*gastrimargia*), (2) fornication (*porneia*), (3) avarice (*philarguria*, love of money), (4) sorrow (*lupê*), (5) anger (*orgê*), (6) discouragement (*akêdia*, listlessness), (7) vainglory (*kenodoxia*, vanity), (8) pride (*huperêphania*). This collection of vices is the source of the Seven Deadly Sins propagated by Pope Gregory the Great (see Chapter 15, this volume) in the sixth century (sorrow makes way for envy, and vanity is included in pride).

The ascetical and spiritual teachings of Evagrios had a great influence on the Syriac mystics. In his Admonitions on prayer he lays down the complete path to "the perfect state": repentance, humility, embarking on labours of virtue, praying constantly, reciting psalms, fighting against pleasurable passions and unclean thoughts, battling with demons until they are afraid to attack ("Respond to your adversary Satan with anger, until he is defeated"); and he harks back to the purification beatitude (Matthew 5:8) when he says that the Spirit of God will love you and live in you, and "if your heart is pure you will see him."[15]

In describing the phenomena of the *psychical* stage, Joseph Hazzaya speaks of being purified of the passions of the body (purity) and of the soul (serenity), and the illuminated eye of the intellect being washed clean of every carnal and intellectual stain; then the person sees himself in the glorious light of the One who is dwelling in him. Then come the contemplation of the corporeal and the incorporeal, and the contemplation of judgment and providence. Again he is following Evagrios, reproducing his "five contemplations," the first of which is contemplation of the light of the Holy Trinity (here Joseph speaks of the glorious light of the One). Joseph says that when the intellect is in this situation the person is inebriated with love for all humans, in spite of their weaknesses and faults, and in the light of the judgment and providence of God he sees them in the glorious form they will assume after the resurrection of the dead.

In the *pneumatical* stage, according to Joseph Hazzaya, the spiritual beings are observed and the sounds of their glorification are heard, that is, the "Holy, Holy, Holy" of the kerubim and seraphim in the vision of the prophet Isaiah, when he cried out, "Woe! . . . my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:1–5). Incidentally, another source for the Syriac mystics was the experience of Saint Paul, being caught up into Paradise, whether in the body or out of the body he did not know, receiving visions and revelations, and hearing things that cannot be told or uttered (2 Corinthians 12:1–4). Notice that the Apostle attributes this to "a man in Christ" with whom he was acquainted, and this suggests that when our writers refer to "a certain brother" they mean it is their own self who had the experience.

Moving on from his Exodus and Conquest analogy, Joseph Hazzaya introduces King David enthroned in Sion and ruling over all his enemies, as a parallel to the attainment of perfection and impassibility, and the cessation of warfare with the demons. Regarding impassibility, impassible here does not mean incapable of feeling emotion, or pain, but liberated from passions, and resistant to temptations, a state achieved through ascetic labours. Here he congratulates any monk who has reached this height, and who

has seen the vision of Jesus Christ enthroned in glory, revealed at the time of prayer, in the state of serenity.

Looking back to the beginning in the fourth century, we might suppose that the manual of spirituality entitled *The Book of Steps* would have a ladder or staircase for the soul to climb, but what we find is three ecclesiastical levels: (1) the visible public church provides baptism in water for the remission of sins for the ordinary upright Christians, who perform good deeds; (2) the invisible church of the heart is for those who are baptized in fire and in the Spirit and are seeking perfection; (3) the celestial church on high, in which Christ officiates as the great high priest, is entered after the resurrection, but the perfect Christians can participate in its liturgy in this life. The motifs of fire and resurrection will reappear in the next two sections.

Fire and Fervour

In the formula for mystical prayer stated by Sahdona-Martyrios (quoted above from his *Book of Perfection*, 2.8.20), when we make an unblemished prayer-offering from a purified heart, "God will send the *fire* of his Spirit to consume our sacrifice, and raise our minds to heaven in the flames." His scriptural basis for this is Paul's injunction to present our bodies as a sacrifice pleasing to God (Romans 12.1). As we have just noted, in *The Book of Steps* the church of the heart is for those who are baptized in *fire* and in the Spirit.

Isaac of Nineveh says that when knowledge is united to faith a soul is clothed in *fiery impulses*, and it glows spiritually, it acquires the wings of impassibility, and it is lifted up from the service of earthly things to the place of its creator (Discourse 51). Conversely, John of Dalyatha warns that the *fiery impulses* emanating from God vanish from the heart of the solitary who likes worldly society and business (Discourse 1). However, speaking of the divine visitations to a solitary in the middle stage, he affirms that grace stirs up hot *fiery impulses* in his heart in the love of Christ, and his soul is set on fire, his limbs are paralysed, and he falls on his face (Discourse 6b).

Joseph Hazzaya has the image of *fire* at the various stages of the spiritual journey. At the outset, a guardian angel causes the seeker to burn with a fire of love for their creator, and the desire to dispose of all their possessions, renounce the world, and go out into the desert. When the person has begun their regimen of monastic exercises, and has had a period of tears and desolation, divine grace causes a fire of love to burn in their heart, allowing them to enjoy fasting and continual prostration before the cross; but the fervour of their love must not pass over into lewd desires, if the demon of lechery conjures up images of women to their mind. In the second stage, in the private cell, the guardian angel provokes an interest in the marvelous works of their creator, and a fire burns in their heart day and night, as they contemplate these with wonder and speechless joy. Joseph congratulates the solitary in whose soul this divine fire is not extinguished, and to whom the beatific vision is revealed.

All this talk of fire and fiery impulses has its origin in the *Spiritual Homilies* of Pseudo-Makarios, which is a fourth-century Messallian work published under the name of Makarios, one of the great monks of the Egyptian desert; it is written in Greek but

is also extant in an abridged Syriac translation. This manual of fervent spirituality was gladly accepted by the monks of the eastern Orthodox churches, and it was also appreciated by the Methodist John Wesley (1703–1791). Makarios invokes the fire of God in several places; for example, he refers to "the divine and heavenly fire" that the Lord came to send upon the earth (Luke 12.49), the fire of the love of Christ (9.9).[16] In the same vein, John of Dalyatha (Letter 15.8–9) urges his reader to add fuel to this blaze so that the purity of their soul may be kindled in it, and he who is the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25) will be manifested in it; this is the mystery of "the anticipated resurrection," he declares, as revealed by Paul (Ephesians 2:6, "he has raised us up with him").

Resurrection and Deification

We are now in the realm of eschatology (as portended at the outset); and this is "realized eschatology"; *the anticipated resurrection* simply means that (as we saw with the celestial church in the *Book of Steps*) the perfect can participate in the worship of the angels in the here and now, before they pass through death and resurrection. John of Dalyatha (Letter 47.4) paints this ecstatic picture: "They are resurrected with Christ, by anticipation, by the glory of his Father, as the Apostle declared (Romans 6:3–11)." "They are no longer in the world, but in God . . . Their mind is not thinking about the world, but all their impulses are emanating from God in silence and great wonderment . . . and they are contemplating God at all times."

Moreover, in anticipation of the resurrection, they have received deification or divinization. Whenever Pseudo-Makarios mentions this deification he quotes the second Epistle of Peter (1:4): "partakers of the divine nature." Pseudo-Dionysios certainly has the concept, but not this proof-text. John of Dalyatha (Letter 47.4) affirms it thus: "Instead of being human they have become divine, in accordance with the foolish desire of their physical forefather (Genesis 3:5)."

Finally, here is the consummation in mystical union, as depicted by John of Dalyatha (Letter 42.4); the mystical path begins with repentance, which is here personified as a maternal guardian and guide, a psychopomp, conducting the soul to its destination): "She stands at the door of the heavenly bridegroom; and he himself welcomes any one who enters with her; in her hands are laid the nuptial crowns, and whoever bows before her is allowed to recline in the bridal chamber."[17]

Notes

1 For a masterly introduction to Syriac Christianity in general and Syriac mysticism in particular (and also a map), go to Brock (x–xliii, 1–363) for translated extracts from the mystics. For a survey of the Syriac mystics, including those not mentioned here (Stephen Bar Sudaili, Gregorios the Hermit, Simon Taibutheh, Dadisho of Qatar, Abraham bar Dashandad, Gregory Bar Hebraeus) see Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 1–105), with translated excerpts (109–180), mostly involving the metaphor of the pearl, beginning with the

Hymn of the Pearl; provides an extensive bibliography and a glossary-index. Note that in that book and in this essay all translations from Syriac and other languages are my own.

2   Ephrem the Syrian (Saint Ephraim): Colless, *Wisdom* (2008), 46–49, 118–120, 198; Brock (30–40). For the Hymns on faith, see Beck.

3   John of Dalyatha (Saba, the Venerable): Colless, *Wisdom* (2008), 96–99, 149–170, 208–209; Brock (328–338); Beulay (1987: 112–116, 214–215, 229–231; 1990; Khayyat; Hansbury) for the letters. For this particular discourse, see Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 159: LXXIV).

4   Sahdona (Martyrios): Colless, *Wisdom* (2008), 83–86, 128–129, 203; Brock (198–239; Beulay (1987: 110–112, 199–201); de Halleux.

5   Ephrem's commentary on the Diatessaron: Leloir (56–57).

6   Aphrahat the Persian Sage: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 40–46, 116–117, 197); Brock (2–28); Parisot for the *Demonstrations* (Syriac and Latin).

7   Adelphios of Edessa and *The Book of Steps*, or *The Book of Degrees*: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 50–68, 121, 198–199; Brock (42–61); Kmosko; Kitchen.

8   Philoxenos of Mabbug, see Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 50–68, 126, 201–202); Brock (101–133). For the letter to Patriq (Syriac and French), see Lavenant.

9   On Pseudo-Dionysios: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 36–39), Beulay (1987: 158–180), Luibheid and Rorem.

10   John the Solitary of Apamea: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 68–74, 122–125, 200–201); Brock (78–100, 188–196); Beulay (95–125).

11   John of Apamea on the spiritual state: Wensinck (98–112).

12   Isaac of Nineveh: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 88–92, 134–138, 204–205); Brock (242–301); Beulay (105–108, 206–210); Miller.

13   John of Dalyatha and John of Apamea: Beulay, *Lumière* (1987: 112–116).

14   Joseph Hazzaya (the Visionary): Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 93–96, 141–148, 206–208); Brock (314–325); 180–185 (anonymous, but a summary of Evagrian teachings, apparently by Joseph Hazzaya); Beulay (1987: 108–110, 215–217); Harb for the letter on the three stages.

15   Evagrios Pontikos: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 22–24); Brock (64–75) (Admonition on prayer).

16   Pseudo-Makarios: Colless, *Wisdom* (2008: 25–36, 27–29 on "fire," 196–197) (bibliography); Mason for a translation of 50 homilies; Stewart for an analysis.

17   On the bridal chamber, see also *Book of Steps* 20.14.

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Mysticism and Contemplation in Augustine's *Confessions*

John Peter Kenney

"Mysticism" is a neologism that entered the conceptual vernacular of the west in the late nineteenth century. It refers to vivid and intense experiences of the divine, to occasions during which spiritual reality is encountered immediately and without the mediation of institutional rituals, social structures, or even language. As such its meaning nests within a larger reorientation in attitudes toward religion in modern western culture, especially a growing de-emphasis upon cultural and social aspects in contrast to personal experience. Private experiences have come to be regarded as the core of religion, while collective activities – including rituals and institutions – are seen to be secondary. Within the domain of personal religion, "mystical experiences" are those deemed most intensely spiritual; they define the deepest sense of sacrality for an individual. Mystical experience is thus understood to be the apex of personal religious experience. It is the height of the modern west's trend toward privileging the personal within religion (Taylor).[1]

There is little evidence of mysticism in this modern sense within ancient Christian literature. Yet if there is any text that appears to conform to this model of personal experience, it is the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. Augustine's depiction of his own religious life lends itself to this interpretation. Since the middle of the nineteenth century scholars have debated the number and nature of Augustine's mystical experiences recorded in the *Confessions* (McGinn 228–232). That discussion has centered on a small set of dramatic passages from the central books of the *Confessions* – texts which recount Augustine's experiences from 386 to 387. These are retrospective accounts, composed more than a decade later when Augustine was a Catholic bishop. They are – what might be called – "ascension narratives," accounts that describe the pilgrim soul's access to the transcendent world. Two are found in Book Seven; they recount Augustine's disillusionment with Manichaeism, an esoteric Christian sect that he had adopted during his early adulthood. Augustine tells us at VII. x (16) that he had read "the books of the Platonists" at VII. x (16) and that those works redirected his quest for

certainty towards his inner self. He tells us that he discovered a level of reality beyond his inner soul by engaging in inner reflection, so that by entering into himself, he could also encounter a higher plane of reality. He describes this level in Platonic terms as "true being," and he identified the reality into which he entered as God. "O eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity, you are my God." The text goes on to describe this interior association with God at VII. xvii (23). That immediate communion came upon him suddenly while meditating on the foundations for aesthetic judgments. By recognizing the stable realm upon which such decisions are grounded, his soul encountered God: "And so in the flash of a trembling glance it reached that which is." It bears mention that both texts recount Augustine's spiritual development before his decision to seek baptism.[2]

The final ascension narrative is different in this regard, coming as it does in the story after his baptism into Catholic orthodoxy and subsequent to his decision to change his life fundamentally by becoming a monk. This famous text, the "Vision at Ostia," is found at *Confessions* IX. x (23–25). Set in a garden in that Roman seaport, Augustine and his family are awaiting passage back to North Africa. But his mother Monica would not live to make the journey. Before her death, she and Augustine are depicted as looking into a garden, and their minds "rose up by ardent affection to the self-same." Together they "touched it slightly with the full force of the heart." At that moment, "in a flash of thought touched the eternal wisdom that abides beyond all things." This startling narrative from Book Nine, along with those of Book Seven, make up the principal texts that depict the immediate presence of the soul to the divine. These are the passages that modern interpreters have identified as mystical experiences. To come to terms with this line of interpretation, we need to step back and look again at what is being discussed in these ancient narratives.

The quest for the personal mysticism of Augustine has impoverished our ability to understand what really mattered about these episodes to Augustine himself. Yet he tells us very clearly what he brought to those events, how he interpreted them, what he came to perceive because of them, and what their fruits were in his life. It is this larger context that should be the basis for reading the ascension texts of the *Confessions*. Put differently, it is the conceptual content of these texts – their theology – that should be the center of our own attempts to grasp the meaning of these passages. There is little significant difference between the contemplative ascents of Book Seven and Book Nine, for they share the same theological character. These cognitive episodes certify human transcendence and intimate the soul's future life. They disclose to the soul a higher level of reality, but they also all fail to sustain the soul's contact with that higher realm. Because, for Augustine, the soul is fallen and powerless it cannot effect its own salvific destiny. These are thus experiences of transcendence that contain within themselves recognition of the soul's need for the salvific mediation of Christ.

Contemplation, far from being an end in itself, serves to open the Christian soul to confession, both its limitations and its need for a savior external from itself. Augustine's admission of the need for Christ as a salvific mediator follows from his simultaneous recognition of the limitations of contemplation. The restricted success of the contemplative ascensions of Book Seven sets the stage for the dramatic turn to orthodox Christianity in Book Eight, to baptism, and to a monastic life devoted exclusively to interior

association with Christ. In Book Nine the mutual contemplative ascent with his mother at Ostia then follows. From it he discovers the spiritual strength to face what is the culminating event of the autobiographical narrative, the death of Monica. All these contemplative ascents can be seen as part of a larger Christian assertion of the transcendence of God and of the soul's ability to grasp that higher realm directly through contemplation. Moreover, they are coherent parts of a larger conversion narrative, interweaving theology with autobiography, which runs from Book Seven through Book Nine. Augustine sketches a consistent Christian portrait of his soul's discovered limitations and his need for a divine mediator. Contemplation laid the groundwork for baptism, painfully disclosing a new estimation of his soul's spiritual capacity.

Thus what appear to us as accounts of mystical experience are in fact personal descriptions of the nature and scope of the human soul's capacity to achieve immediate knowledge of the transcendent and the divine. The ancient texts themselves – both Platonic and Christian – are centered on assessments of the human soul's capacity to engage in transformative contemplation, preceded by rigorous moral preparation and culminating in moments of deep cognitive access to a higher level of reality. The pagan Platonic schools were the central tradition espousing such a path to transcendence, and, while differing in some important details, they were united in regarding the human soul as divine and immortal. One school, the Roman school of the middle and late third century, was particularly keen on the human soul's innate capacity to achieve transcendence through its native spiritual capacities. Headed by Plotinus, an Egyptian from Alexandria, the school espoused the practice of philosophy and inner contemplation as a means to salvation, for it understood the soul to be only partially descended into the body, with a higher self always free from the vicissitudes of earthly existence. It was works from this pagan Platonist school that Augustine read in a Latin translation, probably in the spring and summer of 386, before he became a Christian. In the *Confessions* he recounts the conversionary insights that this reading catalyzed. It is these texts, with their attestations of his immediate knowledge of transcendent wisdom, which have been read as instances of mystical experience. In fact they are complex texts recording both Augustine's moments of cognitive success and also his realization that the Platonism had misconstrued the power of the soul to effect transcendence by accessing its undescended higher self. All this can be seen if we examine these three ascension narratives themselves.

The Ascension Narratives of Book Seven

Confessions VII. x (16) presents the beginning of Augustine's conclusive shift to orthodox Christianity. He has been a member of the Manichaean religion – a heterodox form of Christianity – for nine years as a young adult. Its dualistic theology pitted a passive power of goodness and light over against an active power of evil and darkness. For Manichees this dualistic model was not just imagery; it was taken literally, for both light and darkness were understood to be competing forms of energy within the physical cosmos. Thus in his Manichaean period Augustine understood the world from a materialist standpoint. *Confessions* VII. x (16) is the moment when that materialist theory

breaks under the force of his reading Platonism, specifically treatises from Plotinus and Porphyry, both members of the Roman school from the late third century (see Chapter 4, this volume). Augustine had been urged to read these works by Catholic Christians in Milan, and he managed to secure Latin translations by Marius Victorinus, a Roman Senator and rhetorician who had converted to Catholicism a generation before Augustine's time. These Platonist treatises opened up to him a shocking new account of reality, one that proposed a higher level of being beyond the physical cosmos. Moreover, his reading of these works catalyzed an immediate cognitive experience of the truth that they propose. To understand the passage we might examine it in three parts, beginning with the initial introspective ascent:

> Thus admonished to return to myself, I entered into my innermost depths with you as my guide, and I was able to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, saw above that eye of the soul an immutable light higher than my mind – not the everyday light visible to all bodies, nor a greater light of the same type that might shine more clearly and fill everything with its magnitude. It was not that light but another, entirely different from all others. Nor was it above my mind in the way that oil is on top of water or the sky is above the earth. Rather it was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it.

The Platonist treatises offer several insights: an awakening to the interior self, an inner light beyond the surface of consciousness, a sense of interior depth and disclosure. This act of deep introspection also exhibits the self's ontological dependence on a deeper source. Nevertheless, there are several immediate differences from books of the pagan Platonists. The *oculus animae* – the eye of the soul – sees a light that is clearly distinct from itself. That light is the foundation for the soul's existence, which then directly addresses its source with the intimacy of direct address. And the first principle discovered in contemplation engages with the soul, directing it in its search for wisdom. All of these themes are departures from pagan Platonism. Because the school of Plotinus regarded the soul as divine, with a portion of it – the higher soul – undescended into the world, there was no need for divine assistance. The soul could recovery its true self on its own through contemplation. But for Augustine, divine intervention is necessary from the beginning of Christian contemplation, for the soul has no native claim on the divine light and no natural means of attaining it. Here the inner ascent is plainly due to a power separate from the soul, yet one that attends its prayers. Thus even in this initial text, when the power of pagan Platonism is immediate, transcendence is presented in accordance with the logic of a different type of monotheism. It is the God of the Psalter who is the helper of the Augustinian soul.

Augustine's depiction of Christian interiority continues:

> Whoever knows the truth knows it, and whoever knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. O eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity, you are my God. To you I sigh day and night. When I first knew you, you raise me up so that I might see that what I saw was being, and that I who saw it was not yet being. And you repelled the weakness of my gaze by shining ardently upon me and I shuddered with love and awe. And I discovered myself

far from you in a region of dissimilarity and heard, as it were, a voice from on high: I am the bread of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into yourself, as with food for your body, but you will be changed into me.

The power of divine love has drawn the soul to this very moment of discovery. The soul recognizes both its contingency and its dependence on an eternal source distinct from itself. This means that the soul's source has a metaphysical location sufficiently distinct from the soul to permit this expression of love. And it means, moreover, that the God who loves the soul can reveal his existence in a mode that the soul can recognize. "Beloved eternity" and "true love" describe the divine source disclosed in contemplation, intimating what God may truly be said to be. The Augustinian soul trembles with love and awe, awakened to the promise of eternity by an act of God. Raised up to a level of reality not its own, the soul simultaneously and forcefully grasps both the eternal being of God and the contingency of its own existence. Augustinian contemplation thus uncovers the soul's fundamental distance from God. So the essential nature of contemplation consists paradoxically both of dissimilarity and association. The language of the passage is also charged with eucharistic imagery, as the divine voice promises that the soul will be changed into God. Here hope is found that the soul may, at the behest of God, close the distance that separates them. None of this can be found in the books of the Platonists.

Augustine concludes this passage with the distant voice of the God of Exodus and a consequent rejection of the Manichean notion of divine extension:

And I realized that because of iniquity you have disciplined man and have made my soul to waste away like a spider's web. And I said: But truth can't just be nothing even if it is not diffused through finite or infinite space? And you cried from far off: "Truly, I am who am." And I heard as one hears in the heart, and from that moment there was no longer any doubt. It would have been easier to doubt that I was alive than that there is no truth perceived by the intellect through the things that are made.

God is not a power or energy diffused within space, as Manichees conceived the Good to be. Augustine now emerges instead with the absolute conviction that God – as true being – is the core of reality. He has encountered the God of Exodus, the God who exists absolutely. In comparison, his own existence as a human being pales in its contingency. This recognition of the reality of God is understood as a matter of direct necessity. The truth of contemplation is thus immediate, non-inferential, apodictical, and indubitable.

This episode is a complex amalgam of Platonism transposed into Christianity. While Platonic metaphysics defines Augustine's representation of transcendence, the theological contour of contemplation is not fundamentally Plotinian, but Christian. For the God that emerges as indubitable has an ontological location sharply distinct from the soul, yet he is also active in closing that gap. Moreover, contemplation is not an act of recovery as in Plotinus, not the awaking to a forgotten but eternal self, not the reassuring discovery of the presence of the One at the depth of the soul. It is instead profoundly disquieting, exhibiting the soul's state as a contingent and fallen being. Yet there is

reassurance here as well, as the soul discerns the voice of God calling at its depth. The God who calls from afar is also attentive to the soul's plight. Contemplation is thus represented according to a different theistic grammar than that of Plotinus. Augustine succeeds in discovering a God of Being and of Love whose existence he will never be able thereafter to doubt. It is upon this critical insight – catalyzed by the books of the Platonists – that the subsequent theological narrative will be constructed.

Augustine's second ascension narrative can be found at VII. xvii (23). The crux of the passage is the fallen nature of the soul. At this point in the narrative, Augustine has come to grasp divine transcendence indubitably, to embrace monotheism, and to reject dualism. The very recognition of transcendence becomes a simultaneous disclosure of the soul's distance from God. This is acutely put at the beginning of VII. xvii (23):

> And I marveled that at last I loved you, not a phantom in place of you. Yet I was not stable enough to enjoy my God, but was swept up to you by your beauty and then torn away from you by my weight. I collapsed with a groan into inferior things. That weight was my sexual habit. Yet the memory of you remained with me and I had no sort of doubt that to whom I should cling, though I was not yet able to do that.

Were it not for its moral condition, the soul might enjoy continuous association with the transcendental and the divine. But the soul's perversity of will prevents this, for it is weighed down by a propensity towards carnal things, especially sexuality. Hence the body is a token of the soul's moral state, but it is not the cause of its fall from the eternal.

In order to sustain the promise of transcendence, the soul must look outside its damaged nature for aid. In the meantime, memory of the soul's momentary enjoyment of the divine must suffice. The ascension narrative itself begins with Augustine asking about the basis for normative judgments. This epistemic issue becomes the catalyst for the account of the soul's inner movement towards eternal truth. The text in full reads as follows VII. xvii (23):

> Then I was inquiring why I approved the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and on what basis I made unqualified judgments about mutable things, saying: this ought to be thus and that ought not to be thus. While asking on what basis I made the judgments I was making, I discovered the unchanging and actual eternity of truth above my change-able mind. And so by stages I went from bodies to the soul which senses through the body, and from there to its inner force, to which bodily senses report external things; that is as far as beasts can go. And from there I went on to the power of reasoning to which is referred for judgment that which arises from the bodily senses. This power itself, ascertaining within me its mutability, raised itself up to its own understanding. It led its thinking away from that which is habitual, withdrawing itself from contradictory swarms of fantasies so that it might discover the light strewn upon it, and then, without any doubt, it could declare that the immutable is preferable to the mutable. On this basis it could know the immutable, for unless it could know the immutable in this way, there would be no way to prefer the immutable to the mutable with certainty. And so in the flash of a trembling glance it reached that which is. Then I clearly saw your invisible things understood through

the things that are made. But I did not have the strength to keep my gaze fixed. My weakness rebounded and I returned to my customary state. I bore with me only a cherished memory and a desire, as it were, for something I had smelled but could not yet eat.

The second ascension in Book Seven proceeds through five levels of interior cognition. These include: the body, soul that perceives body, the inward force of soul, the power of reasoning, and finally intelligence itself. The last of these is identified as that which is unchangeable, that which is. The fulcrum of the scheme is the power of reasoning. This capacity for judgment is both fallible and yet capable of enhancing its capacity for discernment. By removal from the confusing impressions of the sensory world, the soul can exercise its rational capacities and come to grasp intelligence itself, an external power that enlightens the soul with truth. Then the soul discovers immutable being itself, that which truly is. In doing so the soul discovers the foundation of necessary judgment. This eternal and unchangeable truth "transcends the mutable mind." Thus the soul has achieved what it initially sought, the certainty upon which to base judgments regarding mutable things.

Moreover it has encountered something beyond itself, paradoxically disclosed by this interior reflection. That new element is the unchangeable eternal truth that is distinct from, though present to, the mind. The soul discovered it "in the flash of a trembling glance." This transition, from the inner soul to a power beyond the self, is at the core of Augustine's ascension narratives.

Yet there is failure here as well, for the contemplative soul cannot sustain this association with eternal truth. The soul lacks the strength necessary to maintain its visionary insight because of its moral infirmity that weights it down. It is the soul's moral condition that forces its sudden declension away from that higher power beyond itself. Whatever else may be said of this event, it is not a mystical experience in the modern sense. We are, in fact, told little about the emotions or sensations involved in this experience, but much about the soul's moral instability. Augustine's concern is to underscore the soul's moral imperfection, something that its brevity underscores. Augustine's soul suffers from its moral insufficiency, not from the transiency of a momentary mystical experience. The defining axis of this episode is, therefore, ethical.

The ascension texts of Book Seven depict the soul's attempts to transform the inner self in order to achieve understanding of truth itself. In this regard Augustine makes common cause with Platonism, which also regards the moral condition of the soul to be determinative of the epistemic level that it can attain. The ascension texts of Book Seven underscore Augustine's epistemic successes, which have nullified his former belief in Manichean materialism with their veridical force. But Augustine also makes clear that he regards the transcendental contemplation practiced by the Platonists as inadequate. This too is an important part of his depiction of these ascensions. Within their success lay the marks of their failure. For his soul could not remain in the higher world but returned instead to consciousness of its human, mundane existence. Contemplation was thus not an act of apotheosis, as the Platonist books claim. It was successful only as a cognitive act. His reading of the books of the Platonists had provided the conversionary insight of transcendence, but their confidence in the soteriological

adequacy of contemplation was misplaced. So it is not that he failed in his efforts at Platonic contemplation, but rather that Platonism failed him.

The Vision at Ostia

The "Vision at Ostia" from Confessions IX is perhaps the best know account of contemplation from Christian antiquity. It occurs in Augustine's narrative after he has succeeded in intellectual vision, something that was possible only because God has aided the soul in its interior ascension. Moreover, the soul's visionary association with God displayed its salvific inadequacy. As we have seen, the contemplative episodes of Book Seven were profoundly ambivalent, certifying divine existence while also exhibiting the soul's distance from God in time. The vision at Ostia also comes after his determination to become an ascetical Christian is secured by divine grace in the garden epiphany of Book Eight, and after his subsequent baptism at the beginning of Book Nine. The final ascension narrative from Ostia helps to present exactly what salvific value can be discovered through contemplation.

The episode is presented in two initial sections, 23 and 24, followed by a further meditation in section 25 on the significance of the ascension. Here is the text of the first two narrative sections (IX. x [23–24]):

> The day was imminent on which she was to depart this life, a day that you knew though we did not. It came about – I believe by your providence through your hidden ways – that she and I stood alone leaning out a window that faced into a garden within the house. We were staying at Ostia on the Tiber where we were removed from the crowds after the exertion of a long journey and we were resting for our sea voyage. We were alone talking together delightfully and forgetting the past and looking forward to what was ahead. We were asking ourselves in the presence of truth – which is you – what will the future life of the saints be like, a life which eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man. But we opened wide the mouth of the heart to the waters from your spring on high, the spring of life which is with you. Sprinkled from that spring up to our limit, we reflected to some degree on so great a matter.
>
> And the conversation led us to the conclusion that any pleasure of the bodily senses, in any physical light, was seen as incomparable with the delight of that other life and not worthy of consideration. Raising ourselves up by ardent affection to the self-same, we traversed by stages all corporal things and the earth itself, where the sun and moon and stars shine upon the earth. And we ascended further by interior reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our minds, and then went beyond them so that we might touch that region of unending abundance where you eternally feed Israel with the food of truth. And there life is the wisdom by which all things are made, both things that and those that will be. But this wisdom is not made, but is as it was and always will be. It is not possible for it to have been in the past or to be in the future, for it just is, since it is eternal. And while we talked and longed for it, we touched it slightly with the full force of the heart. And we sighed and left behind the first fruits of the spirit bound

there, as we returned to the sound of our speech where a word has both a beginning and an ending. But what is like your word, our lord, who abides in himself without growing old and renews all things?

Augustine's account is striking for several reasons: It is a joint ascension accomplished by both interlocutors, rather than a solitary interior journey. And one participant, Monica, is not a promising candidate for classical Platonic contemplation, since she is uneducated. Yet they are both baptized Christians, conformed through baptism to the divine image. Their conversation pertains to the "eternal life of the saints," a topic that directly anticipates the forthcoming death of Monica. Augustine then presents a pattern of ascent pursued jointly by both souls. Its levels include: the bodily senses, corporeal objects, the heavens, the mind, and eternal wisdom. The entire ascent is conducted "in the presence of truth which is you yourself." Augustine and Monica move beyond their own speech into silence, into the quietude of wisdom, because of that divine presence.

The text then discusses the soul's intimacy with Divine Wisdom. Use of "heart," the biblical seat of moral affection and decision-making establishes a point of contrast with the earlier ascent of Book Seven. While in Book Seven there is language of the soul "reaching" the eternal (VII. xvii [23]), the Ostian account emphasizes that contact with wisdom is a matter of the heart, of the moral self. As we have seen, the discourse of Book Seven was rather more abstract, relying on a Platonic model that emphasized the soul's capacity for judgments regarding necessary truths. But here in Book Nine, it is *sapientia*, wisdom as such that is touched by the pilgrim souls, if only to a small degree. A moral transformation of the soul through baptismal grace has occurred in the interval, changing the inner resources of the self.

The use of "first fruits of the spirit" from Romans 8 underscores the eschatological nature of contemplation. Its employment fundamentally changes the metaphysical scope of the self. The Christian self has no native grasp on the transcendental world and no natural kinship with it. This association was conferred by the creator at the soul's initial generation and restored after the fall by a savior. Contemplation is a momentary insight into the nature of this ontology and the salvation history that is spooled around it. It is a momentary glimpse from a fallen world through an aperture opened by the grace of Christ emergent within the soul, but not naturally found there. Interior contemplation is the necessary means to that moment of understanding, but it is a singular gift, not a natural capacity to be exercised from deep within the soul. The valence of contemplation has thus been radically changed in Augustine's new Christian context.

Augustine then reflects anew upon the ascension that he and Monica enjoyed at IX. x (25):

Therefore we said: If to anyone the tumult of the flesh became silent, if the images of earth and water and air became silent, if the heavens became silent, and the very soul became silent to itself and surpassed itself by not thinking of itself, if all dreams and visions in the imagination became silent, and all speech and every sign and whatever is transitory became silent – for if anyone could hear them, they would all say: "We did not make

ourselves, but he made us who abides in eternity" – if, having said this and directed our ears to him who made them, they were to be silent, then he alone would speak not through them but through himself. We would hear his word not through the tongue of the flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, nor through the obscurity of a likeness. Instead we would hear him, whom we love in these things, alone and without them. It was thus when we extended ourselves and in a flash of thought touched the eternal wisdom that abides beyond all things. If this could continue, and all other visions of a much lesser sort could be withdrawn, then this alone would ravish and absorb and enfold the beholder in inward joy. Eternal life is of the quality of that moment of understanding for which we sighed. Is this not the meaning of "enter into the joy of your lord"? And when will that be? When we all rise again but are not all changed.

This Ostian narrative charts the boundaries of human nature and knowledge. Monica and Augustine reach the highest state available to human beings: an unmediated vision of God. They are able to enjoy God, something that eluded Augustine in the ascents that occurred before his baptism. Here the souls of Monica and Augustine find joy with God in anticipation of their final state of eternal association with him. But beyond this they cannot go, for their souls are human, still in need of redemption. This final ascension narrative provides a compelling warrant of the orthodox Christian representation of the fallen soul and a transcendent divine source to which it may attain momentary and uneasy access. Through their mutual interior contemplation Monica and Augustine have encountered the eternal creator of their souls distinct from themselves, a personal One who calls from the eternity in which he abides. It is this eternal wisdom that they attained at that moment of understanding in Ostia.

The Nature of Christian Contemplation

The theological books of the *Confessions* (X–XIII) that follow the vision at Ostia sketch out a larger understanding of the Christian practice of contemplation. In these later books Augustine reflects on the nature of contemplation, when reformed by grace and by his confession of Christ. Contemplation has disclosed the "amazing depth" of the soul – above all its potential to discover the truth through divine grace. Yet contemplation has laid other things bare as well: the contingency of the soul's existence, the spiritual powerlessness of its fallen state, its inability to associate eternally with God. But confession of Christ can deepen and renew contemplation, for the resurrection of Christ offers a new source of power to the fallen soul. This Christian contemplation emerges more explicitly in the later books of the Confession, which form a theological coda to the personal narrative of the first nine books. Augustine has now come to believe that the act of confession, of speaking out of the depths of fallen existence to God can transform contemplation. Through confession the soul proclaims to God its recognition of his existence while admitting with contrition its sins. It is confession that separates the presumption of Platonic contemplation from the humility of Christian communion.

That Christian contemplation – now newly conceived – is rooted in scripture. This "solid firmament of authority" provides the soul with a foundation more sure than philosophical dialectic. By meditating in silence on the divinely inspired text, a practice in which Augustine once saw Ambrose engage (VI. iii [3]), the soul can begin its inner journey with the surety of grace. Thus Christian contemplation is rooted in the church, in its scriptures, and in the capacity for theological discernment found there (see Chapter 14, this volume). The Christian contemplative life is founded on the knowledge and delight that emerge from scriptural reflection, which is a form of divine dialectic (XIII. xviii [22]). This ecclesial dimension is essential to Augustine's final representation of contemplation. Christian contemplative practice must be grounded in reflection on scripture. This supersedes Platonic dialectic, having a stronger, more authoritative basis in the gospel and in the church (XIII. xxii [32]). Dialectic is no longer needed for spiritual discernment, having now been superseded by reflection on divine word in scripture. The language of audition, prominent in Augustine's reflection on Ostia, comes more clearly into focus in the late books, as the soul's listening to scripture is made the foundation for Christian contemplation (XIII. xxx [45]).

Behind this scriptural imperative are larger claims about the nature of contemplation. Augustine now realizes that the fallen soul can engage in a return to God through the Spirit active in the church. Contemplation is one aspect or element in that conversion. The presence of the Spirit in the Christian soul is the motivating force behind it. Through this presence, the soul can to attend to God, and, in so doing, the spirit draws the soul more tightly to the divine nature (XIII. xxxi [46]). This presence of the spirit is essential to the contemplative love of God. It was present, largely unnoticed, even in the pre-Christian ascensions of Book Seven; now it is recognized as the cornerstone of the Christian contemplation. As the guarantor of scripture, the Catholic church emerges in Book Thirteen as the true vehicle for Christian contemplation. Augustine views it not as the mere aggregation of those souls that have been called or predestined by God to salvation (XIII. xxiii [33]). Rather, it is "a living soul," a society of contemplative souls whose occurrence is not a natural element in the structure of reality, but a result of human reformation. It is the divine Word, taught in the Gospels, that brings this "living soul" into existence (XIII. xxi [31]).

If the indwelling of the spirit of God is the source and power of the soul's contemplation, then Christian contemplation is participation – to some degree – in the life of the Trinity (XIII. xxxviii [53]). Indeed Augustine comes to believe that the contemplative soul has a share in the intellection of God. Contemplation is the sight of God directed towards creation and then back upon himself through contemplation. God's contemplative presence is the active force holding reality in existence, and the Christian soul can connect up with that divine intellection. Augustine thus discerns a trinitarian dimension to contemplation. The contemplative soul is inhabited by the spirit and knows "the things of God" only through the spirit (XIII. xxxi [46]). The activity of the spirit is the agent of divine self-contemplation. It is this divine contemplative motion, out into creation and back through the "things of God," that establishes the great rhythm of creation. It is this majestic spiritual movement that is discovered in contemplation.

The vast canvass of Augustine's interpretation of contemplation, in particular its ecclesial dimension, underscores how impoverished our contemporary understanding

of his thought in terms of "mysticism" can be. But if we put aside our search for personal mystical experiences in the *Confessions*, we can discover the larger dimensions of Augustine's own categories of reflection. And when properly read in the context of the late antique discussion regarding the nature of theōria, the significance of contemplation in the *Confessions* can be seen to be a powerful statement of the limitations of the human condition and the active power of God at work in the depths of the soul. For it was the fruit of experience, and not experience itself, that was the end for Augustine. For this reason, the category "mysticism" helps us little in analyzing Augustine's account of contemplation in the *Confessions*. There is a cold friction between this notion and the text itself. Any reader who desires to understand the thought of Augustine on God and the soul must resolve to move beyond the impoverishment of modern theories of "mysticism" into the rich and complex discourse of ancient contemplative literature.

Notes

1   For a more extensive discussion of these issues and other matters considered in this essay, the reader may wish to consult Kenney 2005.
2   All translations from the *Confessions* are by the author.

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Augustine's Ecclesial Mysticism

J. Patout Burns

During his gradual conversion and preparation for Christian baptism in Milan, and in his following retirement into study in Italy and Africa (386–390), Augustine pursued and guided others in the practice of Christian contemplation, though he found success episodic and fleeting.[1] Once he was drafted into the clergy of Hippo Regius in the spring of 392 and began to preach, first as a presbyter and then as bishop, he developed an alternate approach to God better suited to the resources and needs of his congregation. Christians believe that the divine has condescended to their own level in order to lead humans to the enjoyment of God.[2] When the Word of God assumed humanity to himself, Augustine noted, he chose parents from the lowest ranks of society and was born in an insignificant village; he made disciples of uneducated fishermen and craftsmen, not philosophers, orators, senators, or kings. Augustine realized that Christ had identified with the kind of coarse and uneducated people he served as pastor, and was leading them to an experience of the divine that philosophers could barely attain and could not sustain.[3]

Augustine continued to pursue intellectual ascent through the spiritual creation to the divine in his personal prayer and in some doctrinal writings.[4] In his preaching, he attempted to demonstrate that God could be known also by attending to the bodily and social realms. The divine presence and operation was evident to an attentive and attuned mind, in the same way that the soul's presence or absence was easily discerned in another human being.[5] He privileged the communal life of the church congregation as the manifestation of the divine.

Augustine focused his community's attention on knowledge of Christ. Though they were not taught directly by Jesus during his earthly life, though they did not watch him dying on the cross and witness him risen from the grave, still they had him in their hearts by faith. Augustine observed that seeing Jesus in the flesh had done little good for most of the Jews. Even if Christ were to appear before the congregation in the church, he asked, what good would it do unless he spoke to them? Yet Christ was present

and addressing them in the scriptures, as these were proclaimed and explained in the church.[6]

That beatifying knowledge of God for which humans were created could be briefly glimpsed by the learned in mystical ascent. In the life of the church, Augustine intimated, Christ offered even the unlearned a privileged opportunity to recognize and experience the heavenly beatitude that was the goal of human life. In his preaching, he invited his hearers to discern anticipations of the blessed life in communal experiences. These glimpses of life's goal – somewhat like the one Augustine shared with his mother in Ostia – confirmed that Christ accompanied his people on this more humble path.[7]

Like his analysis of Christian intellectual contemplation of the divine, Augustine's explanation of congregational anticipations of the heavenly enjoyment of God can be studied in four parts. He helped his people identify certain experiences as mystical foreshadowings of their heavenly goal. He offered a theological explanation of the incarnation of the divine in Christ that justified this interpretation of their experiences. He explained the ascetical processes that would purify the congregation and enable a fuller experience of God. Finally, he exhorted the people to practices that would develop their common life and move them toward its heavenly fulfillment. Because this essay attempts to delineate Augustine's attempt to develop a congregational form of Christian mysticism, it must rely primarily on the sermons that were transcribed by secretaries as he preached them.[8]

Glimpsing the Goal

Augustine identified three types of "mystical" experience in which the congregation could identify the divine presence and discern the nature of the heavenly goal to which it was called: the joy of understanding scripture intimated heavenly knowledge of God; the services of praise and worship reflected the heavenly liturgy; and, finally, the people's desire for God anticipated its satisfaction.

Augustine called attention not only to the presence of Christ in the words of scripture but also to the community's joy in understanding the truth of these texts. In a sermon on Martha and Mary, he conceded that Martha's work of feeding Jesus was necessary, but focused on the food Jesus provided to Mary. The two women were symbols of present and future life. Both were good and praiseworthy; but only one would last. Yet even now, he observed, the congregation joined Mary in enjoying that future life. The people had set aside business affairs and family cares; they had gathered in the church; they stood still and were intently listening. The bishop shared the words with which Christ fed them all. Augustine urged his people to look forward to the day when they would no longer stand in the church to receive the Word from a preacher but would recline in the kingdom to enjoy a feast served by Christ himself.[9]

Augustine's expositions of the Psalms proceeded phrase by phrase of the text, often resulting in long and complex sermons that were filled with digressions and elaborations. Working his way through Psalm 147, he found himself focusing on a single phrase, "Who gives peace to your boundaries." After expending more than seven thousand words, he found himself tiring. Yet he felt urged on by the attention of an apparently

insatiable congregation. He broke off his commentary on the text to note their eagerness. The enthusiasm of spectators in the amphitheatre paled in comparison to the pleasure these Christians found in the truth of God's word. That crowd – usually seated – could never stand, much less maintain its attention, as long as this congregation already had. Their zeal, he suggested, was inspired by their longing for the peace of God's kingdom. Their delight brought such great joy to him that he pushed on,[10] using nearly three thousand more words to complete the exposition.

In other sermons, Augustine explained God's use of obscure language in scripture that required allegorical interpretation. Any information or guidance these texts provided was already known to Christians from clear and straightforward texts. The hunt for meaning in a puzzling text through figurative exposition piqued interest; finding a known truth in an unusual setting gave it new life. A warning against schism, for example, could be given in plain language (Matthew 12:30) or it could be woven into an interpretation of the great hauls of fish that nearly broke the nets and swamped the boats (Matthew 4:19; 13:47–50; Luke 5:6–7; John 21:6–8).[11] God used obscure language in scripture to delight its readers and to keep its teaching fresh and alive.[12] One of the favorites of Augustine's congregation was the explanation of the 153 fish caught in the haul recounted in John 21. The text was read annually in the octave of Easter and the congregation sometimes began applauding as soon as the preacher launched into the arithmetic exercise that they all knew so well. Take the 10 precepts of the law and add the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit, through which the law is fulfilled; this gives 17. Then add all the integral numbers beginning with 1 and ending with 17; that makes the 153.[13] All the precepts had to be observed, Augustine concluded, but they could be fulfilled only by the gifts of the Spirit![14]

The delight that the congregation experienced in hearing scripture and its interpretation was a foretaste of heavenly life, Augustine explained. There, truth would come to them not by attending to the readings and their exposition by the preacher; it would proceed from its divine source directly into their minds. Rather than relying on the rain coming from outside them, they would find a fountain of truth within. Their joy would be all the greater.[15] Thus, Augustine suggested that his hearers's delight in understanding the divine truth while standing in the church and attending to the explanation of the scripture was a foretaste and anticipation of their heavenly destiny.

A second example of revelatory congregational practice was the praise of God. Earthly life, Augustine observed, was filled with work made necessary by human mortality – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, offering hospitality to travelers. What would the blessed do in heaven, where no one would need these helps? Their occupation in heaven would be the praise of God – "Alleluia" and "Amen" forever and without end. As the forty-day preparation for Easter symbolized the bitter and burdened life on earth, so the fifty-day celebration of Easter symbolized the joy of heavenly life, when the church sang the praise of God.[16]

During this Easter season, the faithful incited one another to the praise of God. Still, their mortality made even the praise of God burdensome. They had to rest and then return refreshed and all the more eager to praise. In the resurrected life, however, the praise of God would be their only occupation, their food and drink, work and rest. Could they imagine being able to sustain it? Every activity in this mortal life wears people

down; humans are satiated with eating, drinking, watching shows. Yet, Augustine noted, they never get tired of being healthy.[17] Praising God would be like the beating of a healthy heart, which never becomes fatigued.[18] Freed of mortality and faced with the splendor of God's presence, enjoyment would never end in satiety. The mind's attention would never lapse in contemplation and the body would never grow weary of praising.[19] The Vulgate text of Sirach 24:29 captured his meaning in speaking of the divine wisdom: "Whoever eats of you will still hunger; whoever drinks of you will still thirst." The scripture said, "still" rather than "again." The hunger and thirst for God in the resurrected life were not episodic but insatiable; the blessed would never grow weary.[20]

Augustine made similar observations about the vigils, the gatherings in the church when the community prayed through the night. Sleep, he explained, was a form of death that interrupted mortal life in order to maintain it. The angels were naturally free of the need for sleep and the resurrection would make the saints the same. Immortal life would be strong, full, and continuous; the saints would praise God in an unending vigil. During the night vigils on earth, the faithful were allowing their desire for that heavenly life to cast off, if only briefly, the burden of their mortality.[21] The Easter vigil was the chief of all Christian vigils: Christ had risen free from the bonds of death; the Christians broke those of sleep, hoping to join him in immortal life. The vigil that marked the annual celebration of Cyprian's martyrdom commemorated the watch kept by his people outside the house in which he was held during the night preceding his trial and execution – on September 14, 258.[22] Many people, Augustine remarked, stayed awake at night for different reasons – some good and others evil. Christians maintained their vigil in expectation of a life that would never end.[23]

Reflecting on the parable of the rich man and the beggar (Luke 16:19–31), Augustine referred to a banquet held in the church – to which all were invited, so that all the tables were full – and compared it to the heavenly banquet, which would be spiritual. By thinking about the earthly meal in which the food was used up, the people might come to understand the heavenly meal. In much the way that the eye feeds on light, the mind would feed by the contemplation of truth without consuming and exhausting it. There they would enjoy the vision of eternity and the praises of God, in secure happiness, mental stability, and bodily immortality.[24] To lift the minds of his congregation above the sometimes raucous banquets in the church, he evoked the meal Christ promised to the Gentiles in response to the centurion's faith (Matthew 8:10–13) and the one the master would serve to the vigilant servants awaiting his return (Luke 12:35–39).

Augustine seldom spoke of the eucharistic celebration as a ritual in which the faithful might glimpse the heavenly reality for which they hoped. Because unbaptized persons could be present for his sermons but were not allowed to remain for the eucharistic ritual, Augustine tended to avoid referring to a practice of which they had no experience. In one long sermon, however, he developed the symbolism of the eucharistic celebration in the church, using the meditation on Christ's fulfillment of the Israelite liturgy in the Letter to the Hebrews 9–10. As a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ, the Israelite priest entered the Holy of Holies to intercede before God while the whole people stood outside. The risen Christ had entered the heavenly sanctuary alone to make the offering; the Christian people remained outside, either in the underworld awaiting the resurrection or on earth engaged in tearful prayer and burdensome

works. When the congregation assembled in the church for the celebration of the eucharist, however, the people crowded around the altar with the clergy. Every Christian was baptized into Christ's body and anointed into his priesthood. In celebrating the eucharist, the entire people looked forward to joining Christ, as his priestly body, to make the everlasting sacrifice at the heavenly altar.[25]

Finally, Augustine identified for his congregation an experience in which each could discover a love and longing for the contemplation of God. He was attempting to distinguish chaste from adulterous fear and the love that inspired each. After a couple of examples, he suggested an experiment to the congregation. Let them look into their own hearts and answer only to themselves. Suppose, he suggested, that God were to come and make this offer:

> You want to sin? Sin! Do whatever pleases you! Whatever you love on earth will be yours. Anyone you hate will die. Whatever you want to take will be taken. Anyone you want to injure will suffer. Whomever you curse will be condemned. You will possess everthing you choose. No one will resist you. No one will say: "What are you doing," or "Don't do that," or "Why did you do that?" Every earthly pleasure you have ever desired will be yours in abundance. Live this way, not for a while but forever. My face, alone, you will never see.

At the last sentence, the eager congregation groaned aloud. That groan, Augustine continued, betrayed their pure love of God, revealed that they held God most precious. Their chaste fear would reluctantly but willingly give up all earthly goods, if this were the price for seeing the face of God.[26] He performed the same experiment, somewhat less dramatically, in another sermon.[27] Augustine's objective was to help his hearers identify within themselves, already present and operative, a love for God that could reach its fullness only after they had left behind all earthly goods and entered heavenly glory.

In each of these instances, Augustine attempted to identify for his congregation a religious experience in which the desired goal of Christian life could be glimpsed within their bodily, social world, a reality evident without rising above the whole creation to grasp at the transcendent divine. He located mystical anticipations of fullness in the gifts that God was already bestowing upon the congregation in its shared life. As was intimated in his descriptions of some experiences, the theological foundation of this mystical approach to God was the identification of the church as the social body of Christ and individual Christians as his members. This Pauline doctrine led Augustine to search for the divine in the communal life of the church as well as by the ascent made through individual interiority. It would also govern his explanation of the forms of purification of the self and the exercises of advancement that were appropriate in the Christian's approach to the divine.

Christ's Ecclesial Body

The foundation of Augustine's interpretation of the communal life of Christians as a mystical anticipation of their heavenly existence was not the Platonic insight into the

human intellect's capacity for unchanging truth but a Pauline understanding of the incarnation. He affirmed that the Word of God had become human to manifest divine wisdom in sensible form, to reverse human pride, and by this humble way to lead his followers to the heights of contemplation.[28] In his preaching, however, Augustine preferred to explain the incarnation as the Word's identification with the church as a social extension of his own humanity. By taking humanity to himself in the womb of the Virgin, the Word of God had become the New Adam, the head of a new human race that was growing in the church. In Augustine's version of the theory of "hypostatic union" then being developed by his younger contemporary, Cyril of Alexandria (bishop 412–444), the Word had become personally identified not only with the son of Mary but with the City of God. Cyril's theory enabled a transformation of the whole human race;[29] Augustine focused on the church and its sacraments as the means of human identification with Christ. What he called the Whole Christ encompassed the Word of God, the son of Mary, and the full assembly of the saints – living and dead.

Scriptural statements, Augustine taught, might be understood as applying to Christ either as divine, or as son of Mary, or as the church – head and/or members. The distinction between the statements made about Christ as divine and as human was essential to dispelling the confusion of the Arians. The scripture presented Christ as both equal to and lesser than the Father, sometimes even within the same sentence, such as in John 20:17, where Christ sent the message to the disciples that he was ascending, "to my father and your father, to my God and your God." Christ could speak about his Father as divine and as human, but of his God only as human.[30] Augustine insisted that Christ could also speak and be spoken of as the church – as head or as body or even as both together. He illustrated this third usage by citing Isaiah 61:10, in which the speaker used both male and female terms – groom and bride – in self-reference. That attribution was appropriate only if Christ was identifying himself simultaneously as both head (groom) and members (bride).[31]

By this interpretative technique, Augustine developed the teaching that even after his resurrection and ascension Christ continued to live on earth (and in the underworld) in his members and also that they – particularly in their common life as church – shared both his earthly and heavenly life. Three scriptural passages may be identified as the pillars of this theological edifice. The explanation of the relation of Christ to Christians was based on 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 and Romans 12:3–8.[32] That Pauline teaching on the distribution of gifts authorized Augustine not only to identify Christ and church as head and body, but also to affirm that Christ shared his life and powers with his members. He elaborated that teaching by extensive use of Ephesians 5:21–33, in which Christ is presented as head and the church as the body or the flesh of Christ.[33] The passage that Augustine found most useful for illustrating the identity of Christ and the church was Acts 9:4, in which Christ accused Paul of persecuting himself, without distinguishing his body or members. Christ spoke from his heavenly glory, where no human or demonic power could trouble him; yet he claimed to be attacked by Paul in his own person. Christ, Augustine insisted, identified with his members and refused to separate himself as head from the sufferings of his body.[34]

The justification of Augustine's identification of Christ with the church and even with the individual Christian was based in the New Testament, but the interpretative

technique itself was most fully developed in his work on the Psalms. In his exposition of Psalm 21(22), for example, Augustine insisted that the cry of abandonment must indeed be attributed to Christ, but only in his identification with the church.[35] Similarly, a confession of sinfulness could not fit Christ as divine, as an individual human, or even as head of the church; it belonged to him only as identified with the members of his ecclesial body struggling on earth.[36] In certain instances, when sin itself was not involved, Augustine was willing to attribute weakness to Christ as head of the church, because he freely had taken the suffering of his members into his own mind and body. Christ could have borne his passion without sadness and distress, as many martyrs had. Instead, he chose to feel these emotions in solidarity with those of his members who could not escape them.[37] As these examples show, Augustine could distinguish between attributions proper to Christ as a human individual and attributions that belonged to him in his identification with his ecclesial members. In many instances, however, Augustine assigned actions and powers to the Whole Christ – divine, human, and ecclesial – without distinction.

Because he had so fully identified with them, Christians could identify themselves in the words and actions of Christ. The fear and sadness that Christ exhibited in anticipation his passion were truly his own emotions, although he experienced these voluntarily rather than being overcome by them. Christ even knew the forsakenness of sinful humanity, prayed to be spared from the death that was its punishment, and thereby assured his members that fear did not separate them from him.[38] In himself, Christ also initiated the voluntary submission of his reluctant members to the divine will.[39] Because mortality was the consequence and punishment of sin, the mortal flesh that Christ bore on the cross symbolized the sinfulness of his ecclesial body. The destruction of his mortality liberated them from both sin and death.[40] The new humanity in which he rose was also to become theirs.[41] Although Christ did not share the guilt of his members, he did join them in sorrow. He initiated and supported their repentance; when they confessed their sins, he spoke their plea for forgiveness.[42]

This doctrine of the ecclesial body of Christ also provided Augustine an essential explanation of the role of Christ in raising Christians up to God, a way that did not rely on philosophical education. Using John 3:13, "No one can ascend into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man," he asserted that their Savior had descended alone, but that he returned to heaven with his members.[43] Since the logic of this text required that the one who ascended was the same as the one who had first descended, it demonstrated not only the personal unity of divine and human in Christ, but extended that unity to his members in the church.[44] It also meant, Augustine observed, that the members of Christ were already sharing the life of their head in heaven, just as he continued to live with them on earth. In the dialogue that prefaced the eucharistic prayer, they could respond truly that their hearts were lifted on high with the Lord.[45]

Augustine's explanation of the union of Christ and the church, which paralleled his understanding of unity of divine and human in one person, served as the foundation for identifying Christian life on earth as a participation in heavenly life. This same doctrine also helped him to specify ways in which Christians should act to develop and fully participate in the life of the community that was Christ.

Purifying the Body of Christ

Augustine's understanding of the church as the social body in which the incarnation of the Word was fulfilled meant that Christians, as a group, were "personally" identified with Christ and that the church was both the means and the place of salvation. The heavenly life that Christ enjoyed was realized in earthly congregations, as they heard scripture, praised God, and offered the eucharist. The blessed life was essentially social; it could be attained and secured only corporately, by engaging other Christians. Although this form of mysticism did not rely on the liberation of the human intellectual powers from the limits of sensation and bodily concerns, it did require an asceticism proper to communal life.

The kind of discipline that Augustine detailed in his exploration of the philosophical ascent to God, particularly in the narrative of post-conversion life in *Confessions*,[46] found its social counterpart in his exhortations to purify the body of Christ from the restrictions imposed by pride and greed. He often summarized this asceticism under the twin headings of giving and forgiving: the sharing of goods and the pardoning of failures.[47] The present section will explore the forgiveness of sins that purified the social body and the next the sharing of goods that advanced it toward its heavenly goal.

Christ's sanctifying work was mediated – in baptism, penance, and eucharist – by the mutual love operative among the members of the church. The petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, Augustine regularly insisted, taught that pardon was socially mediated; it was received by being given.[48] Christ had conferred the power of forgiving sins upon his disciples three times. It was first given to Peter, as representative of the whole church (Matthew 16:19).[49] Then Christ explicitly bestowed the same power on all members of the community and warned that they must exercise it for those who offended them (Matthew 18:18–19).[50] Finally, on the evening following his resurrection, Christ again endowed his disciples with the power to bind and loose, identifying it as the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22–23).[51]

Although the fifth-century church forgave sins through the rituals of baptism and of public confession, each of these could be used only once in a Christian's life. Both pernicious practices and inevitable daily failures were regularly repented and forgiven through communal confession of guilt and, particularly, through informal apology and reconciliation among members of the community. By the seeking and granting forgiveness, individual Christians were freed from guilt and the community was healed from the divisions that would weaken its life in Christ. Augustine particularly encouraged these practices of mutual care. He regularly reminded his congregation of the need to forgive others, even appealing to individual self-interest.[52] Christians must avoid the burning desire for revenge and the cultivated anger that hardens into hatred, since these would make them unable to receive forgiveness from God for their own sins.[53] To protect themselves from this great danger, they had to make an attempt to come to agreement and peace with those they thought had offended them.[54]

Living in the church community required more, however, than granting pardon when it was asked. Human weakness meant that Christians would always be dealing with sinners. Although the most egregious sinners left or were expelled from the

communion of the church, many malicious persons remained.[55] Even monks, who in African practice lived in community, had to tolerate difficult people.[56] The parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24–30) clearly indicated that sinful people would be found inside the church and must be endured until the judgment of Christ.

Toleration, however, did not mean ignoring the problem people; Christians were called to struggle against evil and advance in love by engaging sinners.[57] Augustine recognized that some Christians willingly "forgave" offenders but then ignored or avoided them. He urged that forgiving from the heart meant actively seeking the elimination of sin and the salvation of the sinner. Christ required his followers to love their enemies, to pray for the conversion of any who offended them, to return good for evil, and to give alms even to the reprobate.[58] Christians should not avoid conflict by glossing over a sin or even lying about it by asking pardon of the sinner.[59] To bear another's burden (Galatians 6:1–2) must not be confused with making that burden one's own by excusing the sin.[60] Nor must the accuser fall into the opposite trap, a self-righteous condemnation that would drive away the sinner and prevent repentance.[61] To heap burning coals on the heads of enemies was to do the true good of working and praying for repentance and reconciliation.[62] Augustine illustrated the effectiveness of this active forgiveness in building the church. Christ had prayed for the forgiveness of those who ridiculed him as he died. Then Stephen showed that disciples could do the same by praying for the forgiveness of those stoning him.[63] God had heard those prayers: the very people who had laughed at the dying Jesus (Stephen perhaps among them) responded to the preaching of his resurrection a few weeks later; Christ himself worked the conversion of the persecutor Saul. The Jerusalem converts formed the ideal Christian community; Paul became the most zealous of the apostles, building the church among the nations.[64]

Christians responsible for others – parents, heads of households, and clerics – had a particular responsibility for correcting those in their charge. Ignoring the failures of children and servants could encourage their wickedness.[65] Punishment administered for correction rather than retribution was an expression of love and even forgiveness.[66] When a Christian judged that nothing more could be accomplished by engagement and prudently withdrew from an offender, the decision had to be taken in hope and with continued prayer that the sinner might eventually repent.[67]

Taken together, these instructions and exhortations make clear that Augustine's objective was the elimination of moral evil within the Christian community rather than patient endurance of weakness and wickedness. This struggle against sin within the social body of Christ was a process of purification necessary for maintaining its earthly unity and attaining its heavenly goal. In that sense, it paralleled the individual's struggle against the sensual addictions and intellectual pride that clouded the mind and prevented a sustained intellectual contemplation of divine truth.

Sharing Goods

Augustine focused on mutual forgiveness as the ascetical practice by which individuals might be freed from malice, the community healed of divisions, and the congregation prepared for eternal life. He promoted the sharing of material goods as the means

of strengthening that unity and fostering the congregation's participation in the life of Christ.

Christ's prayer on the cross for the forgiveness of those who rejected and executed him bore abundant fruit. Once the Holy Spirit had descended upon the disciples, their witness to Christ brought the conversion of more than eight thousand Jews, and the first church was formed in Jerusalem.[68] Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32 describe those Christians as sharing all their material goods and being one in heart and mind. Augustine explained that the Spirit's gift of charity established this unity and maintained it by the sharing of goods.[69] In many contexts, the Jerusalem community served as his ideal of Christian life. It had attained the perfect unity in Christ that is symbolized in the eucharistic bread and wine.[70] Its being one in mind while many in body manifested the love that is God and made it a preferred analogy for the unity of the distinct persons who are one God.[71] More importantly for present purposes, Augustine identified the Jerusalem community as the symbol of the eschatological church. Its sharing of material goods foreshadowed the perfect community among the angels and saints: all were equal and shared the glory of God; the honor of the heavenly city was communal, not private.[72]

In his exposition of Psalm 132 (133), Augustine appealed to the Jerusalem church to explain the delights of Christians living as one. His Latin translation read "in unum" and he used the Greek equivalent – *monos* – to make a connection to monks. He observed that contemporary monks tended to live in communities rather than alone and thus that their living "in one" heart and mind was realized by sharing material goods.[73] This was the ideal and purpose he set at the beginning of his own monastic rule.[74] Unlike the practice elsewhere in Africa, the clergy of Hippo also lived together from a common fund in the bishop's house. Their lifestyle was deeply appreciated by the congregation; they used it to score points in arguments with their friends among the Donatist schismatics. When Augustine discovered that one of the presbyters had not actually disposed of his property, he apologized to the congregation for the embarrassment. He agreed to allow clerics who were unwilling to meet the standards of Acts 4:32 to live independently on their own resources.[75] In other contexts, he praised siblings who shared ownership of a patrimony rather than dividing it.[76] He approved the care parents showed in providing for their children and protected inheritance rights,[77] though he insisted that these be balanced by care for the poor.[78]

The practice that Augustine urged upon his congregation was the sharing of income and of other renewable resources. Wealth and poverty, he explained, were irrelevant to a person's standing before God; wealth did not make a person evil and poverty did not make a person righteous. In interpreting Abraham's response to the rich man that he had enjoyed good things during his lifetime and was not being tormented (Luke 16:25), Augustine reminded his hearers that Abraham himself had been wealthy and argued that the rich man was condemned not for his possessions but for his neglect of the beggar starving at his gate.[79] The real dangers were the pride that often afflicts the wealthy,[80] and the greed to which both rich and poor were susceptible.[81] Augustine recognized that disparity in wealth could divide the community, yet he did not urge the propertied to attempt the dispossession enunciated in Matthew 19:21. Instead, he applied 1 Tim 6:17–19, which made pride and trust in earthly wealth the enemies of the gospel.[82] Riches, he insisted, must be treated as an opportunity for doing good. The rich should

follow Christ through the eye of the needle by using the resources God had given them to witness to Christ and support the poor.[83]

For the congregation to pursue the standard of the Jerusalem church in this limited way and thereby to advance toward the ideal heavenly city, however, everyone must have the opportunity to share resources in support of others. The role of the wealthy was easily defined; their riches were to be at the service of the poor, simply on the basis of need. The rich were not to judge the poor worthy or unworthy of their largess, though they should never encourage sin by their gifts.[84] To the extent possible, the wealthy should serve the poor personally and thus recognize their shared life.[85] Augustine also reminded the poor of the many resources they had for supporting others. Christ had noted the value of a cup of cold water, water that the donor had no resources to heat.[86] The poor often enjoyed better health and bodily strength, with which they could provide service to others.[87] Even those without any resources to offer should provide sympathy and encouragement to the needy.[88]

Augustine often exploited the identification of Christ with his members in the church. To give to the poor, he urged, was to give to Christ himself and to act on his behalf. Christ could help the poor directly but preferred to send them to others so that they might serve him.[89] He did not, to be sure, neglect the responsibility Christians had to those who did not share their religious commitment but he could not assign the same significance to this good work as he could to the sharing of goods among the members of Christ.[90] Within the church, the sharing of material, mental, and religious goods was not simply a manifestation of charity but a means of establishing its unity of mind and heart and, thereby, of anticipating the blessed life that all hoped to share.

Conclusion

As John Peter Kenney explains in his contribution to this volume, Augustine developed a distinctly Christian form of the contemplative ascent to God, one centered on Christ as mediator. Augustine's understanding of Christ as the New Adam and head of the church in which the human race was renewed led him to recognize social forms of ascent to God. In the worship practices of the church congregation, heavenly life could be glimpsed and anticipated just as surely as it might by the trained and educated Christian withdrawing from the senses into the mind and then ascending the ladder of being and goodness toward its divine source. Each form of mysticism had its proper asceticism for purification and development of the individual and community. Each strained toward the same homeland. In Augustine's person and in his legacy as a bishop and monastic founder, the two ways are intertwined.

Notes

1   Conf. 7–9.
2   This essay builds on Bernard McGinn's analysis of Augustine's teaching in *Foundations*, vol. 1, pp. 248–251. See John Peter Kenney's "Mysticism and Contemplation in

Augustine's *Confessions*" in this volume for an account of Augustine's continuing cultivation of contemplation (Chapter 13).

3 Serm. Dolb. 26(198*).59–60.

4 E.g. Conf. 10.40.65; Trin. 8–15.

5 Serm. Dolb. 26(198*).30–31, 23(374*).9.

6 Serm. 263.3.

7 Conf. 9.10.23–26.

8 Éric Rebillard, "Sermones" in Fitzgerald 790–792.

9 Serm. 104.

10 Psal. 147.20–21.

11 See, for example, Serm. 248, 249, 251, 252.

12 Psal. 138.31, 140.1, 149.14.

13 Serm. 249.3, 250.3, 251.3.3, 252.1–2; Serm. Guelf 15(229M).1, Serm.Wilm. 13 (252A).5; see also Serm. 131.5, 151.8.8, 179.6 for parallels outside the Easter context.

14 Eu. Io. (Tractates on the Gospel of John) 122.9.

15 Serm. 217.5; Gen. Man. 2.5–6.

16 Serm. 243.9.8, 252.9,12; Serm. Frg. Verbr. 25(Serm 211A); Serm. Guelf. 8(229B).2.

17 Serm. Guelf. 8(229B).2.

18 Serm. Frg. Verbr. 25 (Serm 211A).

19 Serm. 243.9.8, 252.9.

20 Psal. 85.24.

21 Serm. 221.3.

22 Act. Cypr. (Acts of St. Cyprian) 2.

23 Serm. Wilm. 7(223G).1, 16(223J).

24 Serm. 339.5, see also Serm. 179.5–6.

25 Serm. Dolb. 26(198*).53–57.

26 Iam iterum interrogo aliquid quod vosmetipsos interrogetis. Si deus veniens voce propria loqueretur nobis – quamquam non taceat loqui per litteras suas, et diceret homini: "Peccare vis? Pecca. Fac quidquid te delectat. Quidquid amaveris in terra, tuum fiat. Cui fueris iratus, intereat. Quem rapere volueris, rapiatur. Quem caedere, caedatur. Quem damnare, damnetur. Quod possidere, possideas. Nemo tibi resistat. Nemo tibi dicat: Quid facis? Nemo: Noli facere. Nemo: Quare fecisti? Abundent tibi ista omnia terrena quae concupisti, et vive in illis, non usque ad tempus, sed semper: faciem tantum meam numquam videbis." – fratres mei, unde ingemuistis, nisi quia iam natus est timor castus, *permanens in saeculum saeculi?* Psal. 127.9, CSEL 95.3:217.1–12. See also, Serm. 145.3.

27 Psal. 85.11.

28 Psal. 30.2.9, 33.1.1, 130.9

29 On Cyril, see Pelikan 226–243.

30 Serm. Dolb. 22(341*).1–2,17.

31 Serm. Dolb. 22(341*).19–20.

32 Augustine cited these verses 125 times, equally divided between his sermons and writings. See, as examples, Serm. 294.10; Serm. Mai 98(263A).2; Psal. 30.2.1.4, 142.3.

33 These verses were cited almost 160 times, a third in sermons. Verses 29–31, naming the church as the body and flesh of Christ, account for half of the sermon citations. Serm. 277.3.3, 344.4, 362.14.16; Psal. 34.2.1, 37.6, 44.3, 48.1.6, 68.2.1, 71.17, 127.3, 138.2, 140.16; Eu. Io. 2.14, 9.10; Serm. Mai 87(242A).3; Serm. Dolb. 22(341*).20; Serm. Etiax 1(65A).

34   This single verse was quoted by Augustine 104 times, all but five instances in sermons. For example, Psal. 26.2.11, 30.2.1.3, 34.1.1, 37.6, 39.5, 52.2, 54.3, 55.3; Serm. Dolb. 22(341*).20,22.

35   Psal. 21.2.3–4, 21.2.21.

36   Psal. 37.6, 40.6, 42.7, 49.5.

37   Psal. 31.2.26, 63.18, 93.19.

38   Psal. 21.2.3–4, 21.2.21, 31.2.26, 34.2.5, 63.18, 70.1.12, 140.5–6.

39   Psal. 93.19.

40   Serm. 134.4.5, 152.11, 155.7.7–8.8, 294.12.13.

41   Serm. 136.6.

42   Psal. 40.6, 42.7, 49.5, 101.1.2, 140.6.

43   Serm 91.6.7, 144.5.5; Psal. 122.1; Eu. Io. 12.8–9, 31.9.

44   Serm. 294.9.9–10.10; Serm. Mai 98(263A).2–3; Serm. Casin 2.76(256B).2.

45   Serm. 362.14.16; Serm. Mai 98(263A).1.

46   Conf. 10.30.41–40.65.

47   Serm. 9.17–18, 83.2.2, 259.4.

48   For example, Serm. 57.11.11–12.12, 58.7.8, 83.3.3–6.7, 114.1–5, 278.6.6, 278.10.10–11.11, 315.7.10.

49   Eu. Io. 50.12; Serm. 149.6.7, 232.3–4, 295.2.2; Serm. Guelf. 16(229N).2; Serm. Lamb. 3(229P).1,4.

50   Bapt. 5.21.29; Eu. Io.121.4; Serm 99.9.

51   Serm. 295.2.2; Serm. Guelf. 16(229N).2; Eu. Io. 121.4; Bapt. 1.11.15, 3.18.23, 5.21.29, 6.1.1, 6.3.5, 6.14.23.

52   Serm. 47.7, 83.1.1–4.4, 114.1–5, 211.3, 261.9–11.

53   Serm. 57.11.11, 211.1, 278.14.14, 315.6.9–7.10.

54   Serm. 211.2,6.

55   Serm. 5.1.

56   Serm. 214.11; Psal. 54.9–10, 100.12, 128.7–9.

57   Serm. 4.14, 5.2, 15.7–9.

58   Serm. 41.7; Serm. Lamb. 4(359A).11, 28(164A).1–4.

59   Serm. 4.20, 5.2, 211.5.

60   Psal. 129.4.

61   Serm. 88.18.19–22.25; Serm. Frang. 5(163B).2–4.

62   Serm.149.17.18–18.19.

63   Serm. 56.9.13–13.17, 90.9–10.

64   Serm. 316.3–4, 317.2–6.5.

65   Serm. Frang 5(163B).3; Psal. 50.24.

66   Serm. 5.2; Psal. 102.14.

67   Psal. 100.8.

68   Eu. Io. 39.5; Serm. Guelf. 11(229G).5; Serm. Mai 86(229I).3.

69   Psal. 131.5, 132.2.

70   Eu. Io. 14.9; Serm. 272; Psal. 132.12.

71   Eu. Io. 14.9, 18.4, 39.5; Serm 103.3.4; Serm. Guelf. 11(229G).5.

72   Psal. 132.9; Serm. Dolb. 26(198*).48; Serm. Lamb. 23(335M).5.

73   Psal. 132.6.

74   Reg. 2–3, Lawless, 80–81.

75   Serm. 355, 356.

76   Serm 107.1.2, 356.3; Serm. Lamb. 5(107A).2.

77   Serm. 355.4–5, 356.7,11.

78   Psal. 131.19, 146.17.

79   Serm. 14, 367.2–3; Serm. Denis 21(15A).5; Serm. Mai 13(113B).2,4; Serm. Guelf. 30(299E).

80   Serm. 14, 36.1–2,7, 50.7, 311.11.11; Serm. Denis 21(15A).5; Psal. 51.14.

81   Serm. Lamb. 5(107A).4–5; Serm. Dolb. 5(114B).9–10,12.

82   Psal. 48.1.3, 136.13; Serm. 36.5–6, 39.4, 61.6.10–7.11, 85.3.3, 177.7–10; Serm. Dolb. 5(114B).12; Serm. Morin 11(53A).4; Serm. Cail. 2.19(346A).4.

83   Serm. 50.3; Serm. Dolb. 5(114B).10; Serm. Cail. 2.19(346A).4; Psal. 51.9.

84   Psal. 102.13; Serm. 41.7; Serm. Lamb. 23(335M).5.

85   Serm. 259.5.

86   Serm. Lamb. 1(105A).1, 4(359A).12, 5(107A).8; Psal. 125.11–13.

87   Psal. 36.2.13, 125.11–13.

88   Serm. Lamb. 4(359A).12; Psal. 103.1.19.

89   Serm. 239.4.4,5.6–6.7; see also Serm. Mai 13(113B).4, Serm. 25.8, 41.7, 86.3.3.

90   Serm. 25.8, 61.12.13, 66.5; Serm. Lamb. 4(359A).11, 28(164A).1–4; Psal. 32.3.29, 46.5.

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Benedictine Monasticism and Mysticism

Columba Stewart, O.S.B.

This essay will suggest the main elements of western monastic mysticism as found in its classic texts. Among them is the *Rule of Benedict* (*RB*), whose few but precious references to spiritual experience place it firmly within a literary tradition based on translated eastern monastic writings, the Latin monastic synthesis of John Cassian, and the burgeoning *regulae* of western monasticism. Indeed, it is misleading to speak of "Benedictine" mysticism, as if Benedict had a distinctive approach to the spiritual life. In the *RB* we see an eminently mainstream presentation of ascetic theology and catch glimpses of an understanding of prayer that emphasizes themes drawn from other monastic texts. Those texts were read within a theological environment shaped most of all by the Bible and its major Latin interpreters. In this survey I therefore begin with that biblical grounding of monastic religious experience, and the corollary importance of the study of Latin as the key to the sacred text and its interpreters. Then I will review the monastic literature available in the west at the time of Benedict, with particular attention to the influence of John Cassian (c. 365–c. 435), whose writings provided an early conduit to the west for the monastic teaching of the east. Benedict's inclusion of Augustine's writings among his authoritative sources points to what would become the classic western monastic synthesis of Augustine's Platonically infused mysticism and the biblically centered prayer of the eastern monastic tradition with its emphasis on compunction (see Chapters 13 and 14, this volume). The result was to be classically expressed in the writings of Gregory the Great (540–604), which would become staple monastic texts in the centuries after Benedict. As the *RB* slowly became influential and then assumed a privileged role in the monastic reforms of the Frankish empire from the mid-eighth century onwards, the "Benedictine" monasticism that emerged from this process rested upon a deep foundation that had been built during more than 350 years of western monastic experimentation.

The focus on the development of the western monastic understanding of prayer, its traces in *RB*, and expression in the writings of Gregory the Great limits the scope of

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this survey. The monasticism of Martin of Tours in Gaul (316–397), or of Paulinus of Nola (354–431) and his wife Theresia at Nola in Italy are important for the history of western monasticism, but they did not affect the development of western monastic spirituality. Celtic monasticism played a role in the spread of *RB* within the continental mission of Columbanus (c. 540–615), but its insular, indigenous form with a distinctive organization of communal life and rich poetic tradition is its own, separate, story. Anglo-Saxon monasticism and its great polymath, Bede the Venerable (672/3–735), drew from the same theological and monastic sources as Benedict and Gregory and laid the groundwork for the flourishing English Benedictine monasticism of later centuries, but here the focus will be on the tradition that nurtured Bede. The Iberian monasticism most famously associated with the bishops Isidore of Seville (d. 636) and Fructuosus of Braga (d. 665) also had its own distinctive character. Isidore would become a popular author in monasteries for his skillful digests of earlier writings but did not himself have a significant influence on the development of western monastic spirituality.

The Psalms, Exegesis, Allegory, and Prayer

The environment for monastic mysticism was immersion in the Latin Bible, and especially the Psalms (Dyer 1999; Stewart 2008). Monks spent hours together each day chanting psalms and listening to biblical readings, as well as several hours of private *lectio divina* ("sacred reading"), focused particularly on the Bible. It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of the Psalms for western monasticism. The *RB*'s comparatively moderate liturgical observance required the monks to spend approximately 3–4 hours daily singing through the 40 or so psalms spread across each day's eight "offices" of common prayer. Benedict required his monks to use each psalm at least once in the course of a week, and several psalms occurred daily as fixed elements of the major offices. Among them were Psalms 3 and 94(95), which opened the nocturnal vigil office, and Psalms 66(67), 50(51), and 148–150, which began and concluded the psalmody of the dawn office of Lauds (the very name for the office comes from the repeated use in those final psalms of the Latin verb *laudare* ("to praise"). These most familiar texts emphasize again and again the basic themes of monastic prayer: the urgent need for God's help, the imperative of compunction for sin, and praise for God's wondrous deeds. The briefer daytime offices of Prime, Terce, Sext, and None consisted primarily of sections of the longest psalm, Psalm 118(119). This extended meditation on the goodness of the divine law repeats synonyms for *lex* ("law") in each of its 176 verses, cycling through repeated invocations of God's *testimonia*, *viae*, *mandata*, *iustificationes*, *iudicia*, *sermones*, *eloquia*, *verba* in a remarkable tour de force that modeled and reinforced monastic meditation on scripture outside the framework of the divine office.

Monastic singers and hearers of the Psalms followed Christian convention in understanding royal psalms as prophecies about Christ, references to Jerusalem as allegories of the church, and so on. Psalms voiced in the first-person singular, traditionally believed to have been the personal prayers of King David, lent themselves most readily to subjective appropriation for prayer. In an era of few books, the Psalms had to be learned by heart for liturgical performance. They were known not so much by their

canonical number as by their opening words. Thus, the psalms listed above were known as *Cum invocarem exaudivit me* and *Venite exultemus Domino*; *Deus misereatur nostri*, *Miserere mei Deus*, and *Laudate dominum de caelis*; and *Beati immaculati in via*. These were the cadences in which monks learned to pray. In Benedict's time there were several modes of performance of psalmody, some of which involved simply listening to a soloist, others more participative with the use of a refrain. The now familiar practice of alternating strophes between two groups ("choirs") of monks became the norm somewhat later (Dyer 1989). The experience of monastic liturgy, then, involved the mutually reinforcing experiences of verbalizing and listening, further ingraining these privileged texts in the memory. Understandably, such intimate knowledge of the psalms deeply influenced the rhetoric of private prayer. Seven of the eight offices, as well as rituals performed in the monastic refectory, began by invoking a verse from Psalm 69(70), "God, come to my assistance/Lord, make haste to help me," that had been recommended by Cassian as a formula for continual meditation.

Monastic common prayer was always in Latin, and given the pervasiveness of biblical formulae, private prayer too would have been largely conceived and expressed in Latin. Latin was not just a learned language but was thought to be a sacred one as well, a belief based on the tradition that the Cross bore an inscription of Jesus' name in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (John 19:20). This elevation of Latin to a place alongside the two biblical languages added a sacral dimension to its already central role in western culture. By the time of Benedict, Latin was no longer a vernacular language. The Psalms were often a monastic newcomer's first substantial encounter with the Latin language, and they were used as a primer for learning Latin grammar. Even for those born in regions where Romance languages predominated, and for whom the difference between their spoken tongue and the Latin of the Bible, the liturgy, and religious literature was not as great as it was for those from Celtic or Germanic regions, the gap was ever-widening as the Romance dialects continued to evolve into distinct languages (Ruff). The insistence on purity of Latin characteristic of the Carolingian reforms in the eighth and ninth centuries (which encompassed both Romance and Germanic regions) suggests that linguistic differentiation had reached a critical stage (Grotans 2006: 16–18) (see Chapter 37, this volume). Among those for whom Latin was entirely alien, such as the Irish, Anglo-Saxons, and the Franks (Charlemagne's native language was a Germanic dialect), instruction in Latin had to be thorough. Scholars have noted that one could count on good grammar and spelling in manuscripts from those regions, whereas in Gaul the language had a greater tendency to show vernacular traits (Zelzer 1987; Grotans 111–154).

The fact that Latin was regarded as a sacred, and not simply a literary, language explains the fascination with etymology characteristic of Latin Christian culture. Biblical narrative was thought to be replete with allegorical mysteries, and so were its component words. This was especially true of proper names, whether personal or geographical. This mystical understanding of language itself was by no means confined to Latin Christianity, as any study of medieval Jewish mysticism will readily demonstrate (see Chapter 8, this volume). Both traditions were approaching God through a language that had passed out of vernacular usage (even if in the Latin world it was still used for administrative and commercial purposes). The Latin Bible offered not

just "text" but potent symbols, deeply evocative and determinative of the ways in which medieval monastic men and women perceived and interpreted the universe around them.

Monastic Tradition and Its Reception in the Early Middle Ages

Given that the deepest theological and spiritual formation came from the Bible, monks and nuns relied heavily on the patristic commentaries and homilies on the Bible read daily at the office of Vigils, in the refectory, and in their personal *lectio divina*. These writings opened up the hidden, "mystical" meanings of Scripture, especially of the Old Testament. Such interpretative texts were complemented by etymological reference works on biblical names and places by Jerome and, later, Isidore. In the ninth century Hildemar of Corbie (d. 850), the great commentator on *RB*, insisted that monks should follow Benedict's recommendation and complement their biblical reading with commentaries (cf. *RB* 73.4), even if they could not find one on the same book. Hildemar further specified that the unimpeachable (*nominatissimi*) authorities for understanding the Bible were Augustine, Gregory, Ambrose, and Jerome (*Expos.* 9). Apart from Gregory, all of these authors were known to Benedict and his monks.

The spirituality and mysticism of early medieval Latin monasticism is not found in mystical or esoteric treatises but is instead to be gleaned from the writings of those key expositors of biblically centered spirituality and from the monastic religious culture described in specifically monastic literature. The monastic writings known to Benedict were largely prescriptive and exemplary, full of recommended practices and stories about heroic saints. Most of the foundational texts of classic Egyptian monasticism became available in Latin translation during the course of the fourth and fifth centuries, supplemented by Latin compositions such as Jerome's lives of famous monks and his letters, Sulpitius Severus' *Life of Martin* and his *Dialogues*, and the first Latin monastic rules. As we will see, Cassian's early fifth-century interpretation and adaptation of the Egyptian tradition had a decisive impact on Latin monastic self-understanding at a formative stage.

Apart from Cassian's writings on prayer, however, there was little theoretical discussion of prayer or mysticism in any of these Latin monastic writings or translations. The major eastern Christian mystical writings seem to have been unknown in the west. For example, although many of the works of Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345–399) were translated in the fourth and fifth centuries, there is no indication that either his treatise *On Prayer* or his *Kephalaia Gnostika* were among them (Stewart 2012). Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* with its profound mystical instruction was not known in the west until George of Trebizond's translation almost a thousand years later (see Chapter 11, this volume). Although the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus was translated twice in the ninth century (see Chapter 4, this volume), its impact on western monastic spirituality would come only in the twelfth century. To understand the *RB*, and the tradition it represents, the principal figures are Cassian, who brought Egyptian monastic teaching on prayer to the west, and Gregory, whose monastic hermeneutic of Scripture was deeply informed by Augustine's mysticism.

John Cassian on Prayer

John Cassian (c. 365–c. 435) wrote at a critical point in the historical development of Latin monasticism (Stewart 1998; Goodrich). In the course of his long life he had journeyed through the major centers of monastic life, both east and west. Probably born in Scythia Minor, a bilingual (Greek and Latin) region on the western coast of the Black Sea (in present-day Romania), he traveled as a young man with his closest friend, Germanus, to Palestine, where they entered a Greek-language monastic community in Bethlehem. After a brief period they went to Egypt and spent more than a decade in the semi-anchoritic desert settlement of Scetis. Driven out of Egypt around the year 400 by an international controversy over Origen's interpretation of Scripture, Cassian and Germanus went to Constantinople and worked for John Chrysostom until Chrysostom was himself engulfed in controversy and driven from office in 405. The two then went then to Rome to plead on Chrysostom's behalf, but then their trail goes cold. Only in the mid-410s does Cassian re-emerge in southern Gaul, now on his own. Based in the port city of Massilia (modern Marseilles), he became a consultant to bishops wanting to establish or to reform monasteries, and according to tradition, was the founder of two monasteries in Marseilles itself.

Cassian idealized his experience in Egypt and tailored the practices and spirituality of Egyptian monasticism to the circumstances of southern Gaul. The result was immensely influential. Together his *Institutes* and *Conferences* constitute the largest compendium of monastic instruction compiled by a single Latin author. The *Institutes* are principally ascetical, with instructions about monastic practices and a presentation of Evagrius' system of eight generic thoughts as the agenda for attaining ascetic maturity. The *Conferences* are more spiritual, with important discussions of prayer, biblical interpretation, and chastity. Cassian proved to be the principal conduit to the west for the teaching on prayer of both Origen and Evagrius (Marsili; Stewart 2003) (see Chapters 10 and 18, this volume), adding to their intellectual emphasis his own understanding of a kind of ecstatic prayer more reminiscent of other strands of Christian spirituality such as the Pseudo-Macarian *Homilies*. Cassian's principal contributions to Latin monastic mysticism were his linking of liturgical psalmody to personal prayer in the practice of "unceasing" prayer, his transmission to the west of Evagrius' teaching about prayer free of mental depictions, even of Christ ("imageless" prayer), and the references throughout his writings to an ecstatic experience of prayer he often described as "fiery" or as an *excessus mentis*, a "going out from the mind."

Cassian's two-part treatise on unceasing prayer (*Conferences* 9–10) fulfills a promise made in the *Institutes*. There his main topic had been the liturgical offices ("canonical prayers") incumbent upon all monks, whether solitaries or cenobites (*Inst.* 2–3). As would later be the case in the Benedictine Divine Office, those services consisted largely of chanted psalms, with each psalm followed by a period of silent prayer. Cassian consistently distinguishes "psalmody" (*psalmodia*) from the "prayer" (*oratio*) that followed it. This pattern is familiar from many Egyptian monastic sources, where it is clear that chanting a psalm was not itself understood to constitute "prayer," but was preparation for a subsequent moment in which a sentiment expressed by the Psalmist (gratitude, praise, lament, etc.) would inspire personal prayer. As noted earlier, the Psalms

lend themselves particularly to nourishment for personal prayer because of their wide emotional range and intense intimacy. In *Conference* 10, Cassian describes a technique to focus the mind that he had learned from the monks in Egypt. It consisted simply of the continual repetition of a psalm verse, "God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me" (Psalm 69[70]:2). In Cassian's view, repeating this verse elided the functions of *psalmodia* and *oratio*, since the phrase is both biblical and deeply personal (*Conf.* 10.10–13). Cassian suggests that constant praying of this formula will also help one to internalize the other Psalms so that they too can become an almost intuitive articulation of one's own feelings and existential situation (*Conf.* 10.11.4–5). In emphasizing this personal and subjective aspect of psalmody, Cassian was likely inspired by an influential treatise of Athanasius, the *Letter to Marcellinus*, a text not translated into Latin until the fifteenth century (Stewart 2011).

Cassian's themes of ecstatic prayer and the necessity of praying without mental representations of God (specifically, of Christ) appear at first to be unlikely companions, located as they are in different parts of the spectrum of religious experience. For Cassian, however, they are essential components of the teaching on prayer outlined in *Conferences* 9–10. For the most part, *Conference* 9 is a conventional catechesis that echoes the structure and principal themes of Origen's *On Prayer*, which Cassian surely knew: the need for suitable preparation before beginning to pray, the various kinds of prayer (based on the four kinds of prayer mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:1), the meaning of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father"), and the efficacy of prayer of petition. To these Cassian adds his own teaching on "fiery" prayer and an extraordinary analysis of spiritual phenomena.

In the *Institutes,* Cassian had already remarked on the possibility of an ecstatic experience occurring during the liturgical offices, prompted by the beauty of a chanter's voice (*Inst.* 2.10.1; cf. *Conf.* 9. 26.1), but he waited until the *Conferences*, with their emphasis on the interior life, to describe this experience more fully (Stewart 1998:116–22). At the end of his review of the four kinds of biblical prayer, Cassian observes that these distinct forms of prayer can suddenly and unexpectedly be gathered up in an exhilarating rush of prayer that transcends speech, thought, and imagination:

> Sometimes the mind, having advanced to and become rooted in true perfection of purity,
> conceives all of these simultaneously,
> and passing through them together like an incomprehensible and voracious flame,
> pours out ineffable prayers to God with the greatest force,
> which the Spirit himself offers to God,
> breaking in with unutterable sighs unknown to us,
> conceiving in that very moment and pouring forth ineffably in supplication such things
> that I say not only could not be spoken by the mouth, but could not even be
> recalled by the mind afterward. (*Conf.* 9.15.2)

Near the end of *Conference* 9, Cassian includes a tantalizing analysis of various forms of intense spiritual experience under the generic heading of "compunction," a term that will later become central to Gregory the Great's spiritual teaching (*conpunctio*; Stewart 1998:122–129). These experiences range from irrepressible shouts of exultation so loud they can be heard in the neighboring cell to the profound introspection of

a mind hidden in deepest silence, overwhelmed and astonished by spiritual illumination, able to pour forth its feelings only in unutterable sighs. In between is the more usual compunction of a sorrow expressible only in tears (*Conf.* 9.27). Then Cassian provides the first analysis in Christian literature of the phenomenon of tears in the spiritual life, considering their multivalent signification of both joy and sorrow, their causes, and the inadvisability of forcing them from dry eyes (*Conf.* 9:27–30). This section concludes with an otherwise unknown – and likely apocryphal – saying attributed to Antony the Great, "It is not a perfect prayer if the monk is aware of himself or of what he is praying," underscoring the theme of *excessus mentis* (*Conf.* 9.31).

With *Conference 10*, Cassian abruptly shifts to his other major theme, imageless prayer. The conference opens with the story of a venerable and exemplary Egyptian monk, Abba Serapion, who learns that his accustomed manner of praying to a mental representation of Christ is both theologically incorrect and spiritually dangerous. Trapped by long habit, unable to change his mode of prayer, the monk collapses in despair (*Conf.* 10.2–5). That this lesson was taught by a visiting deacon from Cappadocia, homeland of the three great theologians from whom Evagrius himself had learned his theology, is Cassian's way of emphasizing the necessity of a correct theology of prayer: from where else would such enlightenment have come? The deacon is even named Photinus, "enlightened one." Cassian's interlocutor in the conference, Abba Isaac of Scetis, explains that the old monk's failure had been to limit his prayer to a representation of Christ's humanity. He had failed to recognize that meditation upon the human nature of Christ was to be a means to reach the limitless simplicity of his divine nature, and was not the destination itself. The Platonic thrust of this movement from the material to the spiritual is underscored by Cassian's analogy to Jesus' withdrawal from the "crowds below" so as to ascend the "mountain of the desert" where he showed the "brightness" of his divinity to his chosen disciples (*Conf.* 10.6). It is at this point that Cassian introduces his "formula" for unceasing prayer, "God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me" (*Conf.* 10.10). With his teaching now complete, Cassian returns to ecstatic prayer, joining his two themes in a single summary description of the highest form of prayer:

> Our mind arrives at that incorruption of prayer . . .
> That is not concerned with considering any image,
> and indeed is not distinguished by any accompaniment of voice or words,
> but with the intention of the mind on fire
> [this prayer] is produced through an inexpressible ecstasy of heart, by an insatiable keenness of spirit,
> and so the mind altered beyond sense or visible matter
> pours forth [prayer] to God with unutterable groans and sighs. (*Conf.* 10.11.6)

For Cassian, both fiery prayer and imageless prayer are ascents from multiplicity, words, and images to a realm of spiritual experience marked by a profound apophaticism. This apophaticism does not exclude feeling, but it is feeling expressed as energy and exuberance. Cassian's ease in working in both registers of spiritual experience – the apophatic and the kataphatic – would become the norm in both east and west. His near contemporary, the Greek author Diadochus of Photikē (fl. c. 450), also juxtaposed explicitly

Evagrian cautions against images in prayer with distinctively Pseudo-Macarian phrases used to underscore the intensity of spiritual experience. We shall see a similar finesse in Gregory the Great.

Benedict of Nursia and Benedictine Monasticism

Against this backdrop of early medieval western monastic culture we can now turn to Benedict of Nursia, his *Rule*, and its spiritual teaching. Recent decades have seen a substantial revision to the traditional view of the origins and development of western European monasticism, emphasizing its complexity and interrelatedness. A better understanding of Benedict's monastic legislation has shown it to be heavily dependent on earlier monastic literature, particularly on the *Rule of the Master*, another Italian rule composed shortly before the *RB*, which was previously thought to be a later derivative of the *RB* itself. Rather than viewing Benedict as a brilliant innovator, modern assessments now consider him to have been a perceptive and sensitive adapter of the rich but rambling and idiosyncratic *Rule of the Master*, judiciously editing its useful elements and replacing its unrealistic model of monastic obedience with more reasonable expectations. To the material adapted from the Master, Benedict added his own reading of the monastic sources, principally Cassian on prayer and Augustine on fraternal relations. The *RB* is thus like its predecessors, an adaptation or synthesis of a received monastic tradition. In the west since around the year 400 such adaptations were typically expressed in the form of a thematically arranged code of life, a *regula*. Although Benedict's own monastery of Monte Cassino was destroyed in 568 and was not resettled until 717, the *RB* itself survived, and over time, it became recognized for its evident practical wisdom and spiritual depth, proving to be an effective tool for monastic reform. As a result, the *RB*, a fruit of the broader western monastic tradition, eventually came to epitomize it.

The *RB* contains more spiritual teaching than one might expect in a monastic rule, though with an emphasis more on asceticism than on mysticism. Most of the chapters on prayer in *RB* are devoted to arrangements for the communal prayer of the Divine Office (*RB* 8–18). An additional chapter describes the attitude appropriate for the singing of psalms (*RB* 19), followed by a chapter "on reverence in prayer" (*RB* 20). The pairing of these two was inherited from the *Rule of the Master* (although the content has been substantially shortened and rewritten), following Cassian's approach in distinguishing *psalmodia* from *oratio*. At this period each psalm of the communal liturgy was still followed by a period for silent prayer, as was the custom in Egypt. Thus Benedict concludes Chapter 20 with the note that "in community, prayer [i.e., after each psalm] should always be kept brief, and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise together" (*RB* 20.5).

Both chapters are concise. That on psalmody reminds its readers that when they sing the psalmody of the offices they are standing in the presence of God and the angels, and should comport themselves accordingly. Benedict's accent on reverence and compunction in psalmody and (as we shall see) in his teaching on prayer points to a strong consciousness of human sinfulness before a God who is both judge and savior. This

awareness reached deep into the monastic imagination, pervading not only the monastic literature of the Middle Ages but also the prayers of the Mass as well. The strongly hierarchical structure of medieval society was amplified by the presence of an invisible spiritual hierarchy that led via ranks of angels to God himself, whether viewed as the glorified Christ the true King (*RB* Prol. 3; 61.10) or less specifically as the Lord God of the Universe as in *RB* 20. Not untypically for his time, Benedict elides the titles "Christ," "Lord," and "God," reminding the reader that there is often a Christological reference implicit even in seemingly generic references to "God."

The *Rule*'s most famous chapter, on the Ladder of Humility (*RB* 7), opens with a vivid evocation of God's omnipresence and omniscience, with the corollary imperative that monks acknowledge and internalize that existential reality as the "fear of God" (*timor Dei*), the classic biblical description of *pietas*. The chapter on psalmody echoes the theme: "we believe the divine presence to be everywhere, and that 'the eyes of the Lord are watching the good and the bad in every place' (Prov. 15:3), and we believe this even more, without the least doubt, when we are present at the Divine Office" (*RB* 19.1–2). The gravity of this acknowledgment lay in the belief that eternal punishment is a very real possibility, even for someone who has a profound faith in God's mercy and a hope for eternal life. This movement from fear of Hell to love for God as the prime motivator for a virtuous life was a commonplace in monastic literature, here expressed in Benedict's depiction of the perfectly humble monk who has climbed the twelve steps of humility to arrive finally at "the perfect love that casts out fear" (cf. 1 John 4:18). Then, "all of those things which previously he could not observe without dread, he now does without effort, as if naturally, from habit, no longer in fear of Hell, but with love for Christ, out of that same good habit and delight in virtue" (*RB* 7.67–69). Progress from fear to love by the practice of humility – like Benedict's teaching on compunction and tears – is traceable to Cassian, whose brief list of ten marks of humility indicating such progress (*Inst.* 4.39) was transformed by the Master into the ladder of twelve steps. Cassian's influence on *RB* comes both via the *RM* and directly through Benedict's own reading of Cassian's teaching on prayer.

Chapter 20 on prayer is as concise as that on psalmody (both are shorter than the Master's equivalent chapters). Its characterization of prayer as imbued with compunction and tears links it to the other references to prayer in the *RB*:

> devote yourself frequently to prayer, each day confess your past sins to God in prayer *with tears and sighing*, and correct these faults in the future. (*RB* 4.57, emphases added)

> we know that we will be heard not because of many words, but in *purity of heart and compunction of tears*. (*RB* 20.3, emphases added)

> [Lenten penance] will be done well if we refrain from all vices, and [instead] give ourselves over to *prayer with tears, reading, compunction of heart*, and the work of abstinence. (*RB* 49.4, emphases added)

> If one wishes to pray privately [in the oratory], let him simply go in and pray, not in a loud voice, but with *tears and intention of heart*. (*RB* 52.4, emphases added)

Of these four key texts of the *RB* on prayer, only the first is derived from the *Rule of the Master* (*RB* 4.57 = *RM* 3.63). That the Master never otherwise links prayer and tears (except with reference to grief over a wayward monk), nor uses the word *conpunctio*, suggests that here we encounter Benedict's own understanding of personal prayer. Indeed, Benedict seems more interested in the qualities of prayer than is the Master, and his deployment of Cassianic terminology such as *puritas cordis* and *intentio cordis* shows him looking to Cassian for help in expressing important but elusive concepts. As we will see, Gregory the Great's appropriation of these aspects of Cassian's thought will draw the thread of compunction right through the Latin monastic tradition.

The *RB* otherwise tells us nothing about personal prayer. Nor does it suggest that a monk should be given over to "contemplation." Instead it emphasizes reading, the *lectio divina* so closely associated with Benedictine monasticism. As suggested earlier, reading and praying over the Bible was understood to bring monks into deeper understanding of the Spirit-laden text. The emphasis in western monasticism on Latin grammar and the study of authoritative commentators on the Bible further underscores the central place in monastic spiritual practice of investigation into hidden, "mystical" meanings of biblical texts. We have already seen the link between liturgical psalmody and prayer with tears in the *RB*; there are similar close associations between *lectio* and *oratio* (*RB* 4.55–56 and 49.4).

Monastic reading at this time was an immersive experience involving the body and memory much more intensively than is the case in modern practice. Phrases were spoken aloud (thus any reading during siesta time was to be done quietly, *RB* 48.5), repeated, and memorized. Benedict's descriptions of reading sometimes use the verb *meditari* or its noun, *meditatio*, common in monastic literature to denote the slow, close reading of texts for the sake both of memorizing them and pondering their meaning (*RB* 8.3, 48.23, 58.5). In an era of handwritten texts typically presented with little or no space between the words on the page, such careful reading and verbalization were also necessary preparation for public reading. The use of eye, mouth, and ear to decipher and remember what was being read meant that private reading was similar to the communal experience of hearing someone chant or declaim a text. The daily schedule of the monastery provided 2–3 hours for *lectio*, a provision described with deceptive simplicity as "let them be free (*vacent*) for reading" (*RB* 48.4, 10, 14, 17, 22). The verb *vacare* appears in one of the earliest Latin monastic rules, from the island monastery of Lérins in southern Gaul, where the first three hours of each day are "left free for God" (*Rule of the Four Fathers*, c. 410). Over the next century the practices did not change, but the monastic vocabulary used to describe it became more precise. Subsequent versions of the *Rule of the Four Fathers* specify "meditation" during that period (*Second Rule of the Fathers*, c. 426–427) and finally as one nears the time of the *RB*, it has become "reading" (*Third Rule of the Fathers*, c. 535). Benedict's use of *vacare* and *lectio* places his spiritual practice within that tradition in which reading, repetition, reflection, and prayer form a unified engagement with the revelation of God in the monk's primary contemplative medium, the Bible. In later monastic writings, most famously in the twelfth-century *Ladder of Monks* by the Carthusian prior Guigo II, these would be presented as formal steps leading one toward contemplation. With Benedict we are still in the less precisely programmed ambit of early monastic spirituality.

This focus on biblical texts as preparation for prayer is reminiscent also of Cassian's method of unceasing prayer described earlier, in which a single verse of Psalm 69(70) is used a repeated formula whenever the mind is unable to read or pray. As noted, Benedict uses the same verse to begin the day hours of the Divine Office and for refectory rituals (*RB* 17.3, 18.1, 35.17). In his portrait of the profoundly humble monk in the twelfth step of humility, Benedict depicts him as "constantly saying to himself in [his] heart what the tax-collector in the Gospel said, with eyes fixed to the earth, 'Lord, I am not worthy, I a sinner, to lift my eyes to heaven' (Luke 18:13)." Here we see text, repetition, and prayer converging in realization of full human spiritual potential. The monk is constantly aware of his sinfulness, stands in prayer as if already at the "fearful judgment," but he trusts in God's mercy, for in him love has cast out fear.

Gregory the Great

Gregory, heir to both Augustine and the ascetic spirituality of John Cassian, became the primary interpreter of the Bible for medieval monasticism. Born into a noble Roman family around the year 540, Gregory served in the civil administration of the city of Rome before becoming a monk after his father's death. Despite traditional assumptions to the contrary, Gregory was not a "Benedictine," even if he may have known of Benedict and perhaps had seen the *RB* as well. He spent several years in Constantinople as the pope's legate to the imperial court. A few years after his return to Rome he was elected pope in 590, restoring vigor to the office and to the missionary outreach of the Roman church to northern Europe and Britain. Gregory retained nostalgia for the contemplative dimension of the monastic life, evident in his letters and other works. Although his writings did not cover the same vastness of biblical terrain as those of some of his predecessors, Gregory's combination of monastic sensitivity to Scripture, pastoral attention to the challenges of the Christian life, and the *auctoritas* conferred by his papacy made him a dominant presence in medieval monastic culture. Gregory has commonly been viewed as a watershed figure: his pontificate signaled a new era in the west and is often viewed as the start of the Middle Ages. For our purposes, Gregory represents the summation of the earlier monastic tradition of biblical interpretation focused on spiritual progress.

Consultation of any medieval library catalog or the innumerable manuscripts of homilies read at the monastic liturgy or in the refectory shows the esteem and affection for Gregory's explanations of the Bible (Deleeuw 861–869; Étaix et al. 70–88). His homilies on the Gospels and the prophecy of Ezekiel, as well as his lengthy meditations on the Book of Job (known as the *Moralia*), were staple texts throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. A fragment of a commentary on the *Song of Songs* (for Song 1:1–8) has survived, but because most of the extant manuscripts preserved it as part of an eleventh-century commentary that was obviously not by Gregory, there were serious doubts, now resolved, about the its authenticity (Gregory the Great, Bélanger 1984: 15–28). The *Dialogues*, with their lives of Italian saints and an entire book devoted to Benedict of Nursia, were more important for promoting the cult and inspiring the iconography of Benedict than for their spiritual content (with an important exception that

will be noted below), and have even been suspected of being a later compilation (Clark 1987; 2003; rebuttal by Meyvaert and Del Santo). A lengthy commentary on 1 Kings (= 1 Samuel in the Hebrew and most modern Bibles), traditionally attributed to Gregory, seems to have been unknown before the twelfth century, and its most recent editor considers it to be a pastiche made at that time (Vogüé; cf. Ruggini/Cracco). This suspect commentary contains the only direct quotation from the *Rule of Benedict* in the Gregorian corpus, casting doubt on the traditional suppositions about Gregory's intimate knowledge of the *RB*.

It is now understood that Gregory's importance for later Latin monasticism lay not in his living according to the *RB* or actively promoting it, but in his role as exemplary interpreter of scripture. Gregory's influence was also widely diffused throughout Isidore's copious writings (which largely consisted of recycled material) and by later monastic authors such as Bede the Venerable. In Defensor of Ligugé's *Scintillae*, a seventh-century thematic compilation of brief passages from major authors, the most frequently included texts – apart from Isidore's citations of earlier authors, including Gregory – are from the *Homilies on the Gospels*. Hildemar similarly cites Gregory more than anyone besides Isidore (the *Moralia* appear most frequently, but references to the *Homilies on the Gospels* abound).

Gregory's style was not as crisp as Augustine's, nor were his exegetical investigations as scientific as Jerome's, but his constant attention to the practical implications of biblical texts – specifically their moral application – gave his writings a uniquely personal quality. His commentaries were first delivered orally, whether to his monks in Constantinople before his election as bishop of Rome (the *Moralia*, early 580s), to the laity in Rome on Sundays and feast days (*Homilies on the Gospels*, 590–593), or to a more specialized lay and monastic audience (*Homilies on Ezekiel*, presented during the course of a month in 593–594; *Commentary on Song of Songs*, probably between 594–598). Gregory modeled a hermeneutic that his readers and auditors could then apply to other biblical texts and to their own lives. As he states in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, biblical allegory provides a "machine for the soul distant from God, to raise it up to God" (2). Gregory's role was to step forward from his own solitary meditation on the Bible to share its fruits with others. This engagement with an audience was central to his method: "I know there are many things in the sacred word that I was unable to understand by myself. But when put in front of my brothers, then I understood them . . . what I teach, I am learning among you – truly, I confess, I am often listening along with you as I speak!" (Ezek II.2.1). As we shall see, for Gregory the sharing of one's own mystical experience with others was an imperative of the spiritual life.

Gregory's principal themes emerged directly from his own monastic reading and prayer. Foremost among them were the central role of compunction and tears in the Christian life; the passage from the active life to contemplation, and then back to action; the illumination of the soul and granting of spiritual vision through grace.

Gregory's emphasis on compunction is traceable to Cassian, though it plays a more dynamic role for the so-called "Doctor of Desire" (Leclercq 29–32; Straw 213–235). As we have seen, for Cassian *conpunctio* was a term inclusive of various forms of intense spiritual experience, whether sorrow for sins or gratitude for God's mercy, and was closely associated with the phenomenon of physical tears. For Gregory, compunction

yoked to desire was the motor of contemplative progress: "Hearts are wounded so that they might be healed . . . The soul struck by the darts of his love . . . burns with desire for contemplation . . . She has been brought back to health by a blow, called back to the safety of deep restfulness by the disturbance of his love. When the wounded mind begins to pant for God, despising all of the offerings of this world, it stretches itself by desire toward the homeland above." (*Mor.* 6.42; cf. *Hom. Ezek.* II.2.8 and II.10.21). Citing the famous verse "I am *wounded* by love" (*Song of Songs* 2:5) according to the Septuagint rather than the Vulgate's rendering of the less vivid Hebrew ("I faint with love"), Gregory echoes for a Latin audience the mystical interpretations of the *Song of Songs* by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. The choice serves him perfectly: *vulnerata ego in caritate* unites the intense pain of *conpunctio* with its cause and reward, divine love. His own *Commentary on the Song of Songs* does not extend to that key phrase, but he does characterize the soul's burning desire for God as being like a kiss in which it feels the sting (*compungitur*) of God's love (18).

Such emphasis on experience is the hallmark of the *Moralia*, in which Gregory developed his theory of compunction most famously as the searing consideration of "where one was" (mired in sin), "where one will be" (at the final judgment), "where one is" (the troubles of the present life), and "where one is not" (heaven) (*Mor.* 23.41). His scheme is reducible to a simple contrast between the compunction prompted by fear of punishment and that arising from love, the grief of regret (*Hom. Ezek.* II.10.20; cf. *Dial.* 3.34). One of Gregory's biblical types for this range of compunctions is the Apostle Paul. Alluding to Paul's mystical experience as described in 2 Corinthians 12, Gregory describes how the Apostle saw both the promise of heaven and the reality of mortal existence: "after the vision of inner light that flashed in his soul by grace in a ray of splendor, he returned to himself: and he found insights into both the good things that are not here, and the bad things that are" (*Mor.* 23.41). This pattern of *excessus/ processus* to "higher" realities, followed by a *recessus* to mundane existence, is characteristic of Gregory's understanding of the contemplative and active lives, and one of his principal debts to Augustine's understanding mystical experience.

Gregory's analysis of compunction echoed the ecstatic language of Cassian, with its emphasis on ineffability: "It is one thing when someone looks within and feels compunction, terrified by fear of his evils. It is another thing to feel compunction while gazing upon the joys above, invigorated by hope and freedom from care (*securitas*). While the first compunction prompts painful and sad tears, this one leads to joyful tears. For it is called 'exultation' when an ineffable joy is conceived in the mind – a joy that cannot be hidden or expressed in words" (*Mor.* 24.10). One can compare Cassian's two compunctions, one issuing in "shouts of unbearable joy" and the other "hidden within the solitude of profound quiet (*taciturnitas*)" (*Conf.* 9.27).

The musings spread throughout the vastness of the *Moralia* came into sharper focus and found a practical application in the *Homilies on the Gospels*, which were frequently heard by medieval monks and nuns at the office of Vigils for Sundays and major feasts, as well as being familiar to them from private reading. An example of Gregory's approach can be found in his homily on the blind man on the road into Jericho (*Hom. 2*, on Luke 18:31–43). The hermeneutical method is typical: first, the historical sense of the text, then its "mystical" interpretation. As Henri De Lubac noted, Gregory thereby

"reproduces the internal logic of the Christian mystery" (De Lubac 1998: 132–134). In this homily, Gregory states, "In historical terms (*iuxta historiam*) we don't know who the blind man was, but we do know who he signifies mystically (*per mysterium*). The blind man is the human race, which since its expulsion from the joys of Paradise in its earliest ancestor has been deprived of the brightness of heavenly light, and has suffered the darkness of its damnation. Now, however, it is illuminated by the presence of its Redeemer, so that through desire it now sees the joys of inner light, and so can walk the path of life, doing good" (*Hom. Gospels* 2.2; cf. 2.8).

With that context established, Gregory returned to the biblical text, still playing on the tension between humankind's present state and its intended condition: "Whoever knows the darkness of his blindness, whoever is aware that he lacks this light of eternity, cries out from the depths of his heart, cries out with the voice of his soul, 'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!'" (*Hom. Gospels* 2.3). But like the hordes of Jericho trying to silence the blind man's cry for healing, the memories of our sins – the "tumult of carnal thoughts" – crowd in to silence our prayer for help. A desperate cry is the only hope of catching Jesus' attention. And so it does: he stops, he turns, he restores sight (*lumen*): "God is now fixed in the heart, and the light (*lux*) that was lost is restored." This light surpasses all earthly rewards, and must be one's total aim: "let us seek the light, not a light that is contained in space, that has an end in time, that changes with the interruption of the nights, that we along with the animals can perceive, but let us seek the light that we can see with only the angels, that has neither beginning nor end."

In his *Homilies on Ezekiel* Gregory explored more fully the contemplative experiences hinted at in the *Moralia* and the *Homilies on the Gospels*. Originally delivered in late 393–early 394 in a time of peril and barbarian invasion, these homilies were thus the last of Gregory's three major biblical expositions. He commented only on the opening and closing chapters of the prophecy (Book I: Ez. 1:1–4:3, Book II: Ez. 40:1–47, with reference also to the Song of Songs). In the homilies he depicts a cyclical pattern of compunction, self-transcendence through being "suspended" in contemplation, and then a feeling of being pushed back down (a *reverberatio*) into the mundane reality of life in the secular world (*Hom. Ezek.* I.10.29, II.1.16–18, II.5.9; Gillet 1975: 50–53). Gregory also interpreted the classic distinction between active and contemplative ways of life, a distinction traceable to Greek philosophy but expressed by Christians according to biblical types (Leah–Rachel, Martha–Mary). Contemplation is fleeting in the present life, constrained as it is by mortal bodies, turbulent thoughts, and pressing obligations of charitable care for others, but the recollection of those moments of transcendence can energize secular action (*Hom. Ezek.* I.5.12–13, II.2.3, II.2.11–14, II.7.10–11). Gregory equally noted the danger of making false assumptions about spiritual progress when ephemeral experiences of "heavenly grace" are mistaken for evidence of perfection. The contrary events of daily life remind one of imperfection and encourage the "gathering of oneself" required for contemplation (*Hom. Ezek.* II.7.12).

This theme of recollection, Augustinian in inspiration, pervades Gregory's writing on contemplation. As he wrote, "By means of tears of compunction we should not seek what is earthly or transitory. He alone suffices who made all things. Let us then transcend all things by means of desire, so that we might gather the mind into [the] One" (*Hom. Ezek.* II.10.21; cf. II.5.9). Gregory presented his cosmology in another of the

homilies, in which he describes the four "voices" (*voces*) that speak to human beings, each corresponding to a plane of existence ranging from the "voice of the flesh" that stirs up thoughts of resentment and other distracting images during prayer; the "voice under heaven (*firmamentum*)" that is the soul's own voice, a spirit subject to both good and ill influences but nonetheless lively and intelligent; the "voice from heaven" that communicates the angelic experience of continual contemplation; finally, the "voice above heaven" (cf. Ezekiel 1:25–26), the soul's apprehension of the God beyond limit, understanding, and sight, conceivable only in such elusive and transcendent terms (*Hom. Ezek.* I.8.13–16).

Gregory placed a particular emphasis on the obligation to encourage others by telling them about one's own mystical experiences (*Hom. Ezek.,* I.5.13, I.10.4, II.2.4, II.3.9–11, II.7.11). In the homilies he is obviously sharing his, and in the *Dialogues* we find a most vivid depiction of personal mysticism in the account of Benedict's vision of the whole of Creation (*Dial.* 2.35). For the most part the *Dialogues* are edifying tales, many clearly patterned on biblical types, meant to show that Italy had saints comparable in spiritual power to those of Gaul (as described in the *Dialogues* of Sulpitius Severus; Meyvaert 2004: 75–77). But here at the end of Book Two, Gregory crowns his account of Benedict's wondrous life with a brief, but thickly described, episode in which his hero, already known for prophetic visions, is granted a glimpse of the whole world gathered into a single luminous ray. Gregory explains this as a sighting of the divine light, which, being without limit, can easily contain even within that single ray the whole of the visible creation. It has the power to expand Benedict's capacity to comprehend it, taking him "above himself" and "beyond the world" even as *within* himself he is made larger so as to grasp the vision (*Dial.* 2.35.6 and 7; cf. 2.3.5 and 9). This combination of ecstatic and enstatic language, also typical of Augustine, shows Gregory deploying the full range of mystical vocabulary available to him.

"Benedictine" Mysticism after Gregory

As we have seen, Benedict adapted the monastic tradition available to him in existing rules and other writings to the use of his monastery, and foresaw that the norms of his own rule were subject to adaptation and revision by later users (*RB* 18.22). The *RB* itself was never understood by its author to be a self-contained monastic charter, complete in itself and immutable. In his final chapter Benedict points his more zealous monks to the "rule" of Basil for further guidance on monastic perfection. From at least the seventh century, the *RB* was often combined with the *Rule for Monks* of Columbanus, a contemporary of Gregory the Great, and the greatest Irish monastic missionary. Arriving in northern Gaul in 590, Columbanus and his companions would eventually found monasteries across Gaul, Switzerland, and as far as northern Italy. Two monasteries at Luxeuil in northeast Gaul and at Bobbio, between Milan and Genoa, became centers for the Irish mission and spawned several other monasteries. Columbanus' *Rule* and other writings were heavily influenced by Jerome, Cassian, and Basil. Even more than the *RB*, the focus was on ascetic discipline and edification rather than on mystical themes. In the tradition of so-called "mixed rules" (*regulae mixtae*), the *RB*

would contribute much of the spiritual and organizational content alongside material drawn from Columbanus' *Rule* and other sources. Few of these mixed rules have survived in the manuscript tradition. This lack of manuscript evidence for other mixed rules suggests that such use of multiple sources is better understood as a "mixed observance" rather than the creation of formal composite document (Diem 2011). Those that have survived were written by men for monastic women: the *Rule of Donatus of Besançon* (d. 660) and the *Rule of a Certain Father for Virgins* attributed to Waldebert of Luxeuil (d. 668).

The growing prominence of the *RB* in the mixed-observance monasteries made it an obvious resource for the Frankish reform of monasticism begun in the mid-eighth century (Semmler 1983; 1993; Diem 2011:70–77). The key figure in the early ninth-century culmination of this process, Benedict of Aniane (d. 821), made the *RB* the fixed norm for monastic observance but regarded immersion in other monastic sources to be an integral part of monastic formation. Thus in the morning his monks listened to readings from other rules, and in the evening they read homilies by monastic and other authors (Ardo, *Life of Benedict of Aniane* 38.7). To support this awareness of the broader tradition, he created the remarkable *Codex regularum*, a compilation of all existing Latin monastic rules known to him (Bonnerue 1999: vol. 1, pp. 53–160), and the *Concordia regularum*, an edition of the *RB* in which each chapter is followed by pertinent extracts from other rules. It was said that Benedict of Aniane gathered these texts to refute those lukewarm and lazy monks who questioned the value of reading ancient sources, "not knowing that blessed Benedict received his rule from others, dexterously creating a single sheaf out of many" (Bonnerue 1999: vol. 2, p. 3). A millennium later this exercise of reinserting the Rule into the stream of monastic tradition was a guiding principle for the *Ressourcement* of Benedictine monasticism after Vatican Council II.

When the *RB* was deployed in new contexts such as the Frankish monastic reforms, it had to be interpreted and applied in a manner cognizant of new social and religious conditions (e.g., the liturgical and theological developments that made a daily celebration of the Eucharist a feature of monastic life) as well as of monastic practices not featured in the *RB*. The resultant commentaries on the *RB* and the customaries that describe monastic observance in specific communities are a valuable source of information about spiritual and liturgical practices. The richest of the commentaries is the remarkable mid-eighth century *Expositio Regulae* (also known as the *Tractatus in Regulam*) of Hildemar of Corbie (d. 850), which survives in the form of detailed notes left by his students (Zelzer 1981). For all of its wealth of information about daily life in a monastery of the Frankish reform, however, even Hildemar's commentary does not suggest any fundamental change in monastic spirituality though one can see shifts in practice. In Hildemar's *Expositio* Gregory the Great's mysticism has been fully integrated into a Benedictine milieu. For example, Hildemar interprets Benedict's evocation at the end of the *RB*'s Prologue of a monk who runs on the path of the commandments with "expanded heart" (*dilatatio cordis*) as meaning a transcendence of self, the created order, and even the angels so as to fix the eye of the heart" on God (*Expos.* 70f; cf. 168f). When explaining Benedict's chapter on the psalmody of the Divine Office (*RB* 19), Hildemar turns around the theme of God's watchful eyes on the monks at prayer, making it instead about the mind's enjoyment of the "invisible light" during the Divine

Office, something impossible at other times because of earthly preoccupations (315). Similarly, Gregory lurks in Hildemar's view that contemplation is possible only for someone who has been engaged in the active life and will return to it. Using the classic typological figures of Leah and Rachel, Hildemar writes of the necessity of doing manual labor (the "active" life for monks) before enjoying contemplation and tears during *lectio divina* (478).

Hildemar echoes Gregory's four kinds of compunction (*Expos.* 173), and cites the claim in the *Moralia* that true prayer relies more on bitter sighs of compunction than on words (*Expos.* 320; *Mor.* 33.43). He is concerned that monks have the opportunity to read with some privacy so that they can feel moved to compunction and tears (483). He also mentions that some people may suddenly be overcome with contemplation (*habet contemplationem*) and should therefore lay aside their book or their work and go to the oratory lest they be deprived of the gift of tears (*Expos.* 500). He parses Benedict's recommendation of Lenten prayer with tears, reading, and compunction (*RB* 49.4) to mean that prayer should be accompanied by tears and reading by compunction, which he defines as sighs (*Expos.* 491).

Hildemar provides clear indications that by his time the earlier distinction between psalmody and prayer, and the custom of leaving a period for silent prayer after each psalm of the Divine Office, were no longer current. He therefore struggles to interpret Benedict's prescription in *RB* 20 that "in community, prayer should always be brief, and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise," which referred to the intervals for prayer between psalms. Hildemar supposes that this means personal prayer offered while the priest is praying on behalf of the community, particularly the inaudible priestly prayers of the Mass, when it is appropriate for each worshipper to offer personal prayers (*Expos.* 321). He makes two suggestions for what Benedict meant by the superior's signal ending prayer, neither of them about the ancient practice of silent prayer following each psalm (*Expos.* 322). Even so, he is aware of the "custom of the Greeks," who pray frequently but briefly lest while prostrate in prayer they be distracted by vain thoughts, and states that this is why Benedict emphasized that prayer should be "short and pure" (*RB* 20.4; *Expos.* 320, cf. 172). When commenting on Benedict's chapter on the "Tools of Good Works," with its prescription that one "willingly listen to holy readings and frequently devote oneself to prayer," Hildemar breaks Benedict's implicit link between *lectio* and *oratio*, and resituates the impulse for prayer to the workplace. He recommends the practice "of the Greeks" for such spontaneous acts of prayer because it would be brief and not unduly interfere with one's obedience, i.e., work assignment. Hildemar even cites Cassian, repurposing Cassian's description of such prayer as it was used in a liturgical context to the very different context of the kitchen or workshop (*Expos.* 172f).

These indications of a shift in practice begin to suggest the spirituality associated with later Benedictines such as the Congregation of Cluny (founded in the tenth century), for whom a lengthy Divine Office laden with extra devotions and the daily celebration of a richly ceremonial conventual Mass became hallmarks of Benedictine spirituality. The earlier monastic interplay of word and prayer, speech and silence, traceable to Cassian and through him to the Egyptian desert, had yielded to a highly ritualized and symbolic religious culture that opened the door to new forms of mystical experience such as visions and eucharistic miracles. With the rise of scholasticism and

full impact of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, the climate of western spirituality was transformed. Benedictines lost their dominant role in western religious life, and felt the influence of these new spiritual currents. The classic western monastic tradition, with its biblical spirituality shaped by customs brought from the Christian east, informed by the Platonic mysticism of Origen and Augustine, and elaborated by Gregory the Great, had served Latin monasticism well. It never disappeared, and has recently enjoyed a modest revival, but has been for centuries only one part of a much richer conversation.

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Medieval Mystics and Mystical Traditions

CHAPTER 16

Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Mystical Tradition

Brian Patrick McGuire

The brothers of the New Monastery (later Cîteaux) founded in 1098 were not espe-
cially interested in the mystical life. If we define this pursuit as individual prayer or
meditation in search of the presence of God, then there was little or no time for such a
pursuit, since the task at hand was to establish a new monastic foundation. This goal
was made no easier once the first abbot, Robert, was recalled to the monastery of
Molesme from which he and his brothers had come in order to live more closely in
harmony with the Rule of Saint Benedict (McGuire 1995: 402–405) (see Chapter 15,
this volume). For Robert's successors, Alberic (d. 1109) and Stephen (d. 1134), the
focus of everyday life was the *opus dei*, the daily and nightly recitation of the Psalms of
David and the singing of hymns in choir, as well as manual labor, performed for the
most part in silence.

This community life based on the Rule of Saint Benedict and requiring collective
effort, whether in church or in the fields, must have attracted the young Bernard in
1113 to arrive with his school friends and relatives and ask for entrance. Bernard
(1090–1153) is described in the first part of the *Vita prima*, his biography written in
the mid-1140s by his friend William of Saint Thierry, as experiencing in childhood a
vision of the child Jesus on the feast of the Nativity (Migne PL185: 229). Since this
episode must have been told to William either by Bernard himself or by one of his close
relatives, it cannot be dismissed as hagiographical filling.

In this article, the mystical life does not necessarily require visions, revelations or
"showings" as described by the great late medieval mystic Julian of Norwich (see
Chapter 24, this volume). At the same time, however, I do not exclude such phenomena
from the mystical life. I am looking for descriptions of interior life in search of God.
Sometimes Bernard seems to be describing personal experience, while elsewhere in his
writings he is less personal. In any case, the life and writings of Bernard initiated a
Cistercian mystical tradition whose central focus is the imagery of the Song of Songs,
especially in terms of the soul's quest for union with Christ the groom.

The sensuous language of the Song, however, is not the only means by which Cistercians expressed their pursuit of God's presence. For Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), the approach to God took place through spiritual friendships in the cloister. Furthermore, there is a Cistercian literature of visions and revelations, especially as found in the *exemplum* literature that until recently has been dismissed either as dubious or superficial. In looking at collections of Cistercian stories, especially as found in the *Exordium magnum cisterciense* from the end of the twelfth century (McGuire 1979: 33–90), I will briefly touch on a Cistercian mystical tradition I find outside the central figures usually associated with it.

Before I turn to Bernard, I will repeat what cannot be sufficiently emphasized: monks did not live in order to write about the mystical tradition. The pragmatic and work-oriented everyday life of the Cistercians seeking to follow Benedict's Rule was the main concern for virtually all monks. We cannot know how individual monks in choir experienced the language of the Psalms, but it is clear that the Psalms provided a linguistic and spiritual foundation for the few monks who were able and willing to convey in writing the contents of their inner lives. Whether we look at Bernard, William of Saint Thierry, or any of the "lesser" Cistercian mystical writers, the Vulgate version of the Psalms is everywhere, celebrating God's creation and God's place in it and rejoicing in God's presence in the life of the individual and society. The Psalms' hymns of praise to everything that lives and breathes are the point of departure for the embrace of a caring, loving and approachable God.

Bernard and the Coming of The Word

Bernard was abbot at Clairvaux from 1115 until his death on August 20, 1153. In the 1120s he began to involve himself in the affairs of the Cistercian Order, and in the 1130s he became active in church affairs in general. His over 500 surviving letters and several treatises manifest a willingness and even eagerness to respond to the spiritual and personal needs of his fellow monks and churchmen (McGuire 2011: 18–61). From about 1135 and until shortly before his death, Bernard regularly delivered sermons on the text of the Song of Songs (see Chapter 2, this volume). These would have been given in chapter, and we can assume that the written text in our possession is not the same as the oral one given to the monks (Leclercq 1976: vii–xxx). Bernard's approach was not that of systematic exegesis, even though he never quite left behind the biblical texts. He reached the beginning of Chapter 3, "In my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves." Each of the eighty- six sermons is complete in itself, Bernard's way of approaching a difficult and challenging text that sometimes led him to personal reflections, sometimes to comments on what was happening in society around him, sometimes to expositions of the language of the Song.

Bernard knew well that there were two main traditions for interpreting the Song of Songs: the one seeing its bride as the Christian church, the other looking at it as the soul of the individual Christian. Much of the time Bernard kept to the second interpretation, but he sometimes returned to the bride as church. In general he allowed himself a wealth of associations with the erotic language of the Song: the kiss, the breasts, the

embrace between groom and bride. Such language Bernard easily transformed into moral exhortation, as in Sermon 85, seeking "him whom my soul loves":

> The soul seeks the Word, and consents to receive correction, by which she may be enlightened to recognize him, strengthened to attain virtue, molded to wisdom, conformed to his likeness, made fruitful by him, and enjoy him in bliss. (SC 85.1, *Song IV*, 195–196)

In Sermon 1, he explained that because his monks had worked hard in studying "divine teaching," mortifying their senses and meditating "day and night on God's law," they could be fed "on bread rather than milk." With the "flesh tamed and the spirit set free," they could "presume to study spiritual doctrines" (SC I.2, *Song* I, p. 2). Bernard expressed his method: "Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning *sola addiscit experientia* (SC I.11, *Song*, p. 7). This song is "the very music of the heart . . . a harmony not of voices but of wills."

Bernard was optimistic that his monks could experience firsthand the advent of God in their hearts. Elsewhere he wrote to Aelred of Rievaulx his conviction that living in nature and doing physical labor was an excellent way of entering into spiritual truths (Bernard: SBO vol. 8 nr. 523, p. 487). Bernard was confident that the Cistercian way of life as he experienced it at Clairvaux and elsewhere provided a necessary preparation for the mystical life. First there was community life based on the Psalms and hard work. Then came personal experience that could lead to growing awareness of God's presence, the mystical life. In contrast with the Desert Fathers, Bernard saw this development not in terms of a distancing of self from community but in joining with it and learning from it (McGuire 2010: 291–295).

Bernard on occasion shared with his audience his perceptions of God's advent as the divine Word. The best-known description of this visitation is in Sermon 74, which is reminiscent of similar passages in Origen's Commentary on the Song (McGinn 185). The opening of the passage deserves to be quoted in full:

> I want to tell you of my own experience, as I promised. Not that it is of any importance. But I make this disclosure only to help you, and if you derive any profit from it, I shall be consoled for my foolishness; if not, my foolishness will be revealed. I admit that the Word has also come to me – I speak as a fool – and has come many times. But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going. (SC 74.5, *Song* IV, 89–90)

Bernard continues in this vein, asserting that the Word has come to him, but adding that its manner in so doing is beyond any sense perception: "His coming was not tasted by the mouth, for there was no eating or drinking." Wherever he looked inside of himself, he found the presence of God: "He awakens my slumbering soul; he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart" (SC 74.6, *Song* IV, 91). This coming was made known by "the movement of my heart." The insight brought Bernard to a sense of rejoicing "in the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind" which gives a perception of "the excellence of his glorious beauty" (Cf. Ps 49:2).

When the Word left Bernard, he felt weak and tried to call it back. "From the burning desire of my heart, I will not cease to call him, begging him to return" (SC 74.7, *Song* IV, 92. Cf Ps 20:3). Here as elsewhere in his writings, Bernard used the language of the Psalms, with their yearning for God's closeness and desire for union. Like his fellow Cistercians, Bernard was wedded to the language of the Psalms. It was natural for him to describe his hope and its fulfillment through their phrases, a point of departure for the imbibing of the whole of the Vulgate Bible. Thus biblical words, phrase and images provided a foundation for the Cistercian mystical tradition.

The desire for God is centered on the pursuit of the Word's presence. As Bernard wrote: "I assure you, my sons, I find joy in nothing else if he is not here, who alone gives me joy" (SC 74.7, *Song* IV, 92). The Word provides truth and grace. The rest of this sermon is a meditation on what is needed and what is given in this visitation.

Seeing and Perceiving God

We know from Bernard's hagiography, the *Vita prima*, that he had high expectations of his monks, at times perhaps too high (Migne PL 185:243–244). He could not imagine that they were not further advanced in the spiritual life than he was. His expectations made it possible to write sermons that for us are masterpieces of literature and spirituality and that require a lifetime of concentration, as pointed out by one contemporary Trappist-Cistercian author (Casey 62–5). But with one recipient Bernard met his equal, or superior, in the spiritual life: William of Saint Thierry. William himself describes how, during an illness, he shared with Bernard moving discussions on the Song of Songs:

> He only gave the moral sense, bypassing the Book's more mysterious aspects, since that was what I wished and what I requested of him. Each day I would write down whatever God enabled me to recall of what I had heard, lest it slip away. He expounded it for me with uninvidious warmth, sharing his intellectual convictions and experiential feelings, and making every effort to teach my inexperienced self the realities that can be learned only by experiencing them. (Migne PL 185:259, trans. Cawley 53)

William claims he did not completely understand what Bernard presented, but his teaching on the necessity of experience rings true on the basis of what we find in the Sermons on the Song of Songs.

In Sermon 31 Bernard considered how God can be seen. The Word can make himself known in various ways. The enduring vision of him is not for this life (SC 31.2). We have the possibility of approaching him but must do so "gently" and "not intrude ourselves upon him" (SC 31.3, *Song* II, 126). The soul is "filled with longing" and experiences "the ardor of its desire" (SC 31.5). Bernard warns his listeners/readers that in this union of the Word and the soul, he is not describing something "perceptible to the senses" (SC 31.6, *Song* II, 128). The bridegroom is nevertheless perceived as "kind and gentle": "In his kisses he shows that he is both loving and charming" (SC 31.8, 131). Bernard is no doubt describing his own life of prayer, but he assumed that he was not

alone in his awareness. The language of the Song gave him a vehicle for expressing the overshadowing of his being in the coming of the Word. In the union of the soul as bride with the groom as Word, the abbot of Clairvaux found the foundation of eternal glory.

As writers on the mystical life before and since, Bernard took care to distinguish between the experience of God in this life and the next. In Sermon 50, for example, he explained to the brethren that "if you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, whole mind, whole strength . . . then God is indeed experienced, although not as he truly is, a thing impossible for any creature, but rather in relation to your power to enjoy" (SC 50.6, *Song* III, 35). This perception of God brings recognition of one's own "true self, since you perceived that you possess nothing at all for which you love yourself, except insofar as you belong to God."

Bernard was talking to monks, but his appeal was not limited to them. His *Sermons on the Song of Songs* provide a careful description of the stages to be reached by all on the path to God. He never gave up his emphasis on experience. As he wrote early in the Sermons: "Today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience" (SC 3.1, *Song* I, 16). From here one can receive "this mystical kiss from the mouth of Christ," so that the person so favored "eagerly looks for its frequent renewal." Thus almost at the very beginning of his exposition of the Song, Bernard challenged his audience to progress in experience. First came the kiss of the feet of Christ, then the hand and finally the mouth (SC 3.3, *Song* I, 18). A person can gather confidence in the experience of these kisses and no longer needs "feel abashed in aspiring to a holier intimacy" (SC 3.5, 19).

Sermon 3 ends with an address to Jesus, one of the few times in Bernard's writings where his language turns into a prayer:

> To you, Lord Jesus, how truly my heart has said, "My face looks to you, Lord. I do seek your face" (Psalm 26:8). In the dawn you brought me proof of your love, in my first approach to kiss your revered feet you forgave my evils ways as I lay in the dust . . . And now what remains, O good Jesus, except that suffused as I am with the fullness of your light, and while my spirit is fervent, you would graciously bestow on me the kiss of your mouth, and give me unbounded joy in your presence. (SC 3.6, 20)

Bernard used his own experience as an example to help out his brothers, as when he told them how he at the beginning of his monastic life could experience "coldness and hardness of heart, while deep in my being I sought for him whom I longed to love" (SC 14.6, *Song* I, 102). At times he got help from the thought of a friend who provided inspiration, but he felt there was something secondary in what came through another's mediation. Bernard lamented that he was more susceptible to "the remembrance of human goodness . . . than the thought of God." Bernard did not hesitate to console and guide others through what he himself knew. He conceded that human loves could seem more powerful than the love of God, and to a certain extent he accepted that limitation and tried to make use of it to advance on his spiritual quest.

In his final Sermon on the Song, Bernard provided his brethren with good advice about how and when to pray. He recommended the nighttime "when others are asleep" (SC 86.3, *Song* IV, 213). Such prayer is to be secret, "witnessed only by God and the

holy angel who received it to present it at the heavenly altar." This is why the bride, in seeking to pray "sought the privacy of her bed at night." In praying we are to seek the Word, who offers everything we need, including material wants.

When Bernard wrote these lines, his life was almost over, and one might expect to find here some final revelation of the mystical life. Instead he continued doing what he had done from the beginning of his Sermons, providing advice and inspiration on how to advance in the mystical life. Often he was practical and down-to-earth, even though at times along the way he indicated the contents of his own deep spiritual experience: "The Bride is seeking the Word, the power of God and the wisdom of God" (SC 86.4, *Song* IV, 215).

Bernard's mystical theology, as first interpreted by Etienne Gilson and more recently by Bernard McGinn, can be found in other sermons and in his treatises, but the Sermons on the Song of Songs by themselves provide the fullest expression of his attempt to give language to the soul's meeting with the Word of God. Bride and Groom embrace each other in a moment of ecstasy (*excessus*), all too brief in this life, a foretaste of what is to come.

The Taste of God: William of Saint Thierry

William may have been born in Liège and was probably educated at the cathedral school in Reims, but all dates for his early life are uncertain (Elder 109). He became a Benedictine monk at St. Nicaise in Reims and in about 1118 first met Bernard at Clairvaux. He was elected abbot at Saint-Thierry outside of Reims but in 1124 asked Bernard to transfer his vocation to Clairvaux. Bernard refused, and in 1135 William joined the new Cistercian foundation at Signy, where he remained until his death in 1148. William's best-known treatise on the spiritual life is the *Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu*, better known as *The Golden Epistle* and dated to 1144–1145. In considering this work as part of the Cistercian mystical tradition, it is important to remember that, by the end of the twelfth century, the *Letter* was thought to have been written by Bernard. William's identity disappeared almost from view and was really only rediscovered in full in the twentieth century.

Scholars discuss to this day who was the better theologian, but William comes across as more striking and incisive in his language, even though there are only minor differences in terms of the actual content of his mystical theology as compared to Bernard's. At times William intensified the physical and even erotic language that Bernard could use. As he wrote to the Brothers of Mont Dieu: "It is for others to serve God, it is for you to cling to him; it is for others to believe in Gold, know him, love him and revere him; it is for you to taste him, understand him, be acquainted with him, enjoy him" (William, *Letter* ch. 15, 14). The final verbs that William here used are powerful: *vestrum est sapere, intelligere, cognoscere, frui* (Guillaume, *Lettre* ch. 15, 156). He was writing to Carthusians, hermit-monks who had hidden themselves away from the world and from each other. But William's treatise was not to be limited to them. It became an outline of the spiritual life that has inspired generations of scholars, monks and mystics. A figure such as Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris and

one of the most powerful voices of his age for church reform, seems to have known the treatise almost by heart (McGuire 2005: 137).

William is perhaps closer to the desert ethos than Bernard was. He says, for example, that the man who is with God "is never less alone than when he is alone" (William *Letter* ch. 30, 19) This is a maxim probably taken from Saint Ambrose, but William, in spite of a desire to be Bernard's friend, seems less attentive to the joys of friendship than Ambrose or Bernard had been. The advice he gives for novices is sober and sensible: "The body should be mortified at times but not broken" (*Letter* ch. 127, 53). In providing inspiration for prayer, William concedes the use of a crucifix or statue, so that "the weak spirit which is only able to think of material objects" then "may have something to which it can apply itself and cling with devout attention" (*Letter* ch. 174, 69).

William's celebration of solitude does not rule out monastic community. He made it clear that "perfect spiritual men" are not to neglect "voluntary submission, the fellowship of the common life and the sweetness of fraternal charity" (*Letter* ch. 190, 76). Having first described the animal and the rational man, he advanced to the spiritual person, where God's Spirit "infuses himself by way of love and gives life to everything, lending his assistance in prayer" (*Letter* ch. 249, 92). William anticipated how God's "abundant sweetness" leads to "exultation, jubilation and a true experience of the Lord." Like Bernard, he was optimistic that spiritual men can embrace, at least for a moment, the presence of God.

William, however, goes even further than Bernard in what can be called a process of deification: "To will what God wills is already to be like God, to be able to will only what God wills is already to be what God is; for him to will and to be are the same thing" (*Letter* ch. 258, 94). Bernard at one point had written about the dissolving of the human person's contribution in the great sea of divine awareness (*On Loving God* 10.28). For both Bernard and William, however, the question is where poetic imagery ends and hard theology begins. But William went quite far: "It makes man one with God, one spirit, not only with the unity which comes from willing the same thing but with a greater fullness of virtue" (*Letter* ch. 262, 95).

In trying to envision this unity of spirit, William described how the soul "in its happiness finds itself standing midway in the embrace and the kiss of Father and Son." Thus the spiritual man becomes "not God but what God is, that is to say man becomes through grace what God is by nature" (*Letter* ch. 263, 96). In this state of being God has exalted man "to the likeness of the godhead" (*usque ad similitudinem divinitatis*) (ch. 273, 98; Guillaume, *Lettre* 362). William agreed with Bernard that self-knowledge was the necessary point of departure for the knowledge of God: "Know yourself and you will have a wholesome fear of God; know him and you will also love him" (SC 37.1, *Song* II, 181). William's mystical language and unification of human with divine spirit reach the very perimeter of theological language and orthodoxy.

The poetry of William's language is also evident in the *Prayer* he wrote to describe his search for God: "in prayer I look for you in that heaven, beautiful indeed, and yet corporeal, which I see above me." He asserted that it is acceptable to "develop a sort of bodily devotion," as in clasping the feet of Jesus (William, *Prayer*, 73). But spiritual prayer requires a further abstraction. William's *Meditations* develop further his

attempts to capture the meaning of spiritual realities. Elsewhere he considered the Holy Trinity (William, *Meditation*, ch. 2, 95). *Meditation* 3 expresses his desire to see the face of God:

> Where are you, Lord, where are you? And where, Lord are you not? This much at least I know, and that most certainly, that you in whom we move and have our being, are in a manner present here with me. (William, *Meditation* 3, ch. 4, 103)

William makes use of a physical language to express this sense of presence: "I know, I feel, I worship, and I render thanks." He moves from his perception of "supreme Good" to remorse that God was nailed to the cross: "Would I not die a hundred and a thousand times for you, Lord Jesus?" (*Meditation* 3, ch. 4, 103). However much William can be abstract in his theological language, as in asserting the unity of the Trinity, he can also become quite concrete, as in dwelling on the facts of the Passion of Christ.

William's *Meditation* 4 asks for the ability to pray and describes a recent period of weakness and pain: "When your Spirit helps our weakness thus, your sweetness moves us to weep copious floods of sweet and fruitful tears" (4, ch. 3, 111). Here begins an autobiographical passage describing what later mystics would call the dark night of the soul. Like Bernard, William used his own self as an example for others, telling his listeners or readers that what they felt, he too knew and had experienced: "And I, who had received the charge of ruling others, appeared as needing to be ruled myself!" (4, ch. 4, 112)

These considerations end in what can be called one of the most beautiful Latin prayers of the twelfth century:

> O Lord, the comfort of my wilderness, a solitary heart and frequent commuting with you. As long as you are with me, O my God, I shall not be alone; but if you leave me, woe to him that is alone; for if I fall asleep, there will be none to keep me warm; if I fall down, there will be nobody to pick me up. (*Meditation* 4, ch. 9, 115)

William asked God to lead him "to the heart of the desert" as he once had done with Moses (4, ch. 10, 116). The soul reaches the holy place where God dwells. The meditation ends on a note of hope, as William describes the joy in his soul when he comes out of Egypt and hears God's voice: "I kiss the yoke and embrace the burden and it is very sweet to me to sweat beneath its weight" (4, ch. 11, 116).

William's meditations express in an exquisite manner a theology of desire. He returns regularly to the Passion of Christ, as in *Meditation* 8: "for my hands, Lord, that did what they ought not, your hands were pierced with nails, your feet for my feet . . . you died that I might live, and you were buried, so that I might rise" (8, ch. 3, 140). This evocation of suffering is combined with the imagery of the Song of Songs: "This is the kiss your tenderness bestows upon your bride; this is your love's embrace for your beloved" (8, ch. 3, 140). *Meditation* 10 continues with the Passion of Christ, in which the soul rejoices: "As the river of joy floods that soul more completely, she seems to see you as you are" (10, ch. 7, 154).

In *Meditation* 12 the holy soul is reshaped in the image of the Trinity, "the image of him who created her after the very manner of his own beatitude" (12, ch. 14, 175).

William takes his point of departure in the classic idea found in Gregory the Great that love is knowledge (*amor ipse notitia est*), but his formula is slightly different: "To have and to enjoy, then, is to understand and love" (12, ch. 14, 175). William puts his trust in the Lord's wisdom and there finds his love, even though it is not complete:

> So then I find you in my love, O Lord, but O that I might always find you there! For since love is not love unless it loves, and yet the will for you is always vehement in me, that is to say, your love that urges me to you, why, then are my affections not always taken up with you? (12, ch. 17, 177)

Similar considerations are to be found in William's treatise *On Contemplating God* as well as in his other writings. William is perhaps the most brilliant theologian of twelfth-century monastic theology in his love of learning and desire for God (Leclercq 1982: 191–235). The disappearance of his name from his writings and Bernard's assumption of the authorial honor only served to make works such as the *Golden Epistle* better known and more available. Bernard's and William's mystical theology, seeking God's presence, grew out of a close bond. In a monastic order that emphasized the value of human relationships, they made use of friendship in formulating a language of divine presence.

Gilbert of Hoyland and John of Ford: Completing the Song

When Bernard died in 1153, his commentary on the whole of the Song of Songs had not gotten beyond the opening of the third chapter. There is no indication in his writings that he felt obliged to make his way through the entire text, but other Cistercians felt compelled to complete the task. Gilbert of Hoyland (d. c. 1172) was abbot of a Lincolnshire monastery that until 1147 had belonged to the Order of Savigny, which that year was incorporated into the Cistercian Order (Dutton 162). Apparently Gilbert was sent here to Hoyland in the adoption of Cistercian usages. By the time of his death about twenty-five years later, he had written forty-seven sermons on the Song of Songs, beginning with: "In my little bed through the night I sought him whom my soul loves" (Sg 3:1).

After Gilbert's death, the challenge to complete the commentary was met by John of Ford (d. 1214), who conscientiously advanced to the end of the Song by writing 120 more sermons. He probably began soon after he took over the abbacy of Ford in Devon in 1191 (John of Ford vol. 1, 3–4, 10–11). In their own time the sermons by John can have had little distribution, for they exist today in but a single manuscript. By the time John laid down his pen in the early thirteenth century, the Cistercians were changing in their orientation. There was a debate about how the monks should deal with the new learning of the schools, and eventually it was decided by the General Chapter that there should be a Cistercian College at the University of Paris (Lekai 80–83). Some of the abbots opposed this move as contrary to the spiritual vocation of the monks, but the new scholastic learning won the day.

It would be unfair to dismiss the writings of Gilbert of Hoyland and John of Ford as secondary and derivative. Even if their literary abilities do not match Bernard's, they

manifest a continuing Cistercian interest in mystical theology. Gilbert opened his first sermon with one of the most popular and important Cistercian terms, *affectus* (affectivity or attachment), in stating that the attachments of those who love are various, because there are different types. Love is expressed in different ways: *Affectus in amore loquitur* (Migne PL 184:11). He considered the loves of the groom. From here there is a long section on the meaning of the night mentioned in Song 3.1: "Thus in the bed of holy rest you receive leisure (*otium*) and understand that there is a certain forgetfulness in the night" (Gilbert *Sermo* 1.4; PL 184:13).

Gilbert's commentary never becomes a purely scholastic exposition of terms. He ends the first sermon with the statement "Rightly then he says that his soul loves, for it wishes to express that intimate and lively and animated affection towards its beloved Jesus Christ the Lord" (*Sermo* 1.6; PL 184:17).

With John we are fortunate to have a Prologue in which he set forth his intentions and expressed his debt to his predecessors. First of all, he asked Jesus for help: "Lord Jesus, this is your business. You must take up its defence on my behalf!" (John of Ford 1: 67). He turned quickly to the bride seeking the kiss of the groom's mouth: "Straightaway I hear your consoling words to her, in which you gladly bestow on this bride of yours the kindest looks and the sweetest speech" (John of Ford 1:69). John felt incompetent in dealing with a book of the Bible that had been commented on by so many others: "I have the greatest desire to hasten after that famous man, and I refer to blessed Bernard, not envious of his glory but trailing in his footsteps" (John of Ford 1:71).

John set forth a threefold purpose in his work. First he wanted to offer God "a sacrifice of praise" (John vol. 1, 73). Secondly he desired "to serve fraternal charity and to discharge to some small degree the debt which I acknowledge I owe my brothers." Finally he wanted his soul to "catch fire from these words of burning eloquence." This explanation indicates that the same spirit of community apparent in Bernard and even in William was still present almost fifty years later. The *Commentary on the Song* was not a solitary task of the lonely monk. It was a manifestation of the brotherly love of the monastery, with the abbot encouraging the brethren to seek God.

In the first of John's many sermons, he considers the bride's statement: "I adjure you, o daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I languish with love" (Sg 5:8). John sees the bride as accepting pain "because charity endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7) (John of Ford 1: 78; 1.1). He imagines how the bride goes back to places where she once secretly met with the groom. He, of course, is Jesus, and the bride is the soul: "She spreads wide her arms, she opens out her heart, she pours forth her soul, in spiritual longing she draws to herself the breath of his love" (John of Ford 1:79; Sermon 1.2). The bride is anxious, for Jesus is not present: "Only loneliness and desolation dwell in chamber and in bed" (John of Ford 1: 80). She has to leave the bedroom and go out into the street to seek her beloved.

John interprets this action as the pursuit of the beloved through preaching, but this does not work out. She has to listen for him in silence. He moves carefully through the text of the Song, restricting himself much more than Bernard did in his interpretations. Sometimes his approach can seem too cautious, and certainly the determination to get through the remainder of the chapters and verses excludes Bernard's vibrancy and

originality. But John's audience had a much better chance of grasping his meaning than did Bernard's.

What is important here, however, is that the spiritual language of love and union remained central for a Cistercian writer. John of Ford's Jesus is the one who "steals into her arms, there to be clasped all the more closely, enjoyed all the more sweetly, held all the more strongly, because the search was so long, the pursuit so difficult, the finding so long delayed" (John of Ford 1: 82; Sermon 1.3).

Guerric and Isaac: Desert and Community, Image and Likeness

For Cistercian writers of the twelfth century the idea of withdrawal into a desert in order to make it bloom through the monks' hard work is paralleled by the inner vision of the individual's withdrawal into a spiritual desert. The Cistercians, however, by no means sought to imitate the Desert Fathers in seeking isolation from each other. The desert myth in its Cistercian manifestation combined with a celebration of community life in order to be made ready for the presence of God (Ward).

This combination of desert and community can especially be seen in the writings of Guerric of Igny. Born in Tournai in the 1080s, a student at its cathedral school, he entered Clairvaux in about 1125 (Guerric 1, x–xiv). He thus had the benefit of knowing and hearing Bernard, who wrote letters praising him. Guerric described four stages of experience: "progressing from the vision which is through faith to that which is through a mirror and an image, and finally from that which is in the image of the form to that which will be in the very truth of the face" (McGinn 279–280). The final vision comes once the days of purgation are over and that which is perfect has come (1 Corinthians 13:1). There is a clarity of progression in contrast with some of Bernard's more difficult passages. Like John of Ford, Guerric sought to be understandable to his audience. But the language is still based on the ever-fruitful Song of Songs.

Another little-known but still significant Cistercian mystical writer of the twelfth century is Isaac of Stella, born about 1100 in England and a student at French cathedral schools, who entered the Cistercians in about 1140, perhaps at Pontigny. Already in 1147 he was elected abbot at Stella near Poitiers, but because of his support of the exiled archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket, Isaac was temporarily sent to a remote Atlantic island, Ré. From here he eventually returned to Stella (Isaac de l'Etoile 7–25).

Isaac is a writer of some subtlety, and I will take only one theme important for him and sadly neglect so much else. He described the process by which the human person and humanity in general return to the vision of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Through them appear true image and likeness. We find in creation reminders of Trinitarian essence, form and gift (McGinn 291). Isaac seems to have been describing divine illumination, derivative of Augustine. It is important here to remember that Isaac, just as Guerric, had first been trained in the schools, with the use of authorities for or against different theses. From here they transferred to Cistercian houses, where such knowledge was considered inferior to the wisdom that comes from seeking the interior meaning of biblical texts through prayer and meditation. The Cistercian mystical

tradition did not deny the use of scholastic analysis but believed in moving beyond purely rational discourse.

Aelred of Rievaulx: God Is Friendship

The Cistercian emphasis on seeking God through community and through personal relationships reaches its fullest expression in the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167). As son of an Anglo-Saxon priest, Aelred was sent as a youth to the court of the Scottish king, where he took on a position of some responsibility. Here he was unhappy, presumably because of a sexual relationship that caused him great guilt, and he found his resolution in the new Cistercian monastery founded in the north of Yorkshire, Rievaulx (McGuire 1994: 39–58).

The Cistercian life fulfilled Aelred's need for affectivity, especially for cultivating bonds of spiritual friendship. Aelred was sent by Rievaulx's first abbot, William, on a mission to Rome. On the way he stayed at Clairvaux and met Bernard, who found in him the perfect monk to show how the ascetic life can be combined with the affective one. Aelred's *Mirror of Charity* (from the 1140s) is both a personal statement about his conversion to the Cistercians and a handbook on monastic life – not in terms of killing the body and soul but in making use of them to seek union with God.

Aelred translated this program into guidance in the spiritual life, something that was not limited to monks. In writing to his sister, Aelred provided a meditation on the life of Christ. He gave her biblical images to use with all the affectivity of her heart: "Embrace that sweet crib, let love overcome your reluctance, affection drive out fear. Put your lips to those most sacred feet, kiss them again and again" (Aelred, *Rule* 81; bk. 3, ch. 29*)*. He meditated on the passion and death of Christ, in asking his sister to visualize each scene: "Follow him rather to the courtyard and bathe with your tears his most beautiful face which they are covering with spittle" (*Rule* 88; bk. 3, ch. 31).

Aelred's writing does not have Bernard's depth and power, but he expresses a conviction that God can be reached through lasting friendships. He ends the first book of his treatment of the subject with the assertion that God is friendship. He admits that this formulation is "unusual nor does it have the sanction of the Scriptures" (*Spiritual Friendship* 66; bk. 1, ch. 70). But if God is love, then he is also friendship, for Aelred can cite 1 John 4:16: "He that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him." Aelred eliminated a long-standing hesitation in Christian ascetic life about the possibility that human friendship might distract from the love of God. Genuine human loves based on spiritual sharing provided a point of departure for seeking the presence of God. In this hope he ended his treatise: "this friendship, to which here we admit but few, will be outpoured upon all and by all outpoured upon God, and God shall be all in all" (*Spiritual Friendship* 152; bk. 3, ch. 134, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28).

Cistercian Visionary Literature: A Sense of God's Presence

Ever since Late Antiquity, western monks had conveyed to each other the conviction that some of them were blessed with the direct experience of God or Christ in this life.

It is debatable to what extent the literature which arose from these experiences should be classified as part of the mystical tradition. There is little doubt, however, that for the Cistercians of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the mystical tradition was also manifested in stories about how exceptional monks and abbots received the vision of the divine. Thus in the collection of stories from the first Cistercian century, the *Exordium magnum cisterciense*, we find a remarkable story about how a monk at Clairvaux came upon Bernard praying before the crucifix. The monk saw the figure on the cross come alive and bend down to embrace the abbot (*Exordium* 102, bk. II, ch. 7).

This story is not to be found in the *Vita prima* or any other segment of the hagiographical literature about Bernard that was used in his canonization process which came to fruition in 1174. It could not have been written down before about 1180, the date for *Liber miraculorum*, many of whose stories were included in the *Exordium*. But this narrative almost certainly reflects the kind of stories commonly told about Bernard's mystical life, and its contents fits perfectly with his devotion to a physical Christ as a means for reaching beyond to a spiritual Christ. The story became so popular that it fostered a number of pictorial representations of the scene, and these continued to be made through the medieval centuries and beyond, including at the Cistercian abbey of Esrum in Denmark in the 1490s. The *amplexus*, as this scene is called, the embrace of Christ, became a trademark for Saint Bernard (France 179–204).

The visions of the next world could also include Mary, the special patron of all Cistercian houses. In the *Exordium magnum* is the story of an especially devout monk at Clairvaux who was rewarded by her with a spiritual drink that seems to have been a kind of alternative Eucharist (*Exordium* 199, bk. 3, ch. 21). In another collection made at Clairvaux, *Collectaneum Clarevallense*, we are told of a monk to whom Christ appeared at vigils, in the night of his Resurrection. He saw "as it were his wounded hands taken down from the wood (of the cross)" (*Collectaneum* 303; ch. xxvii). The monk cast himself at the feet of his Savior.

It is important not to limit the mystical life to the most literate and learned members of the monastery. Although I agree that mystical experience is not required for mystical theology, the Cistercians assumed that some of their number were privileged to share in the coming or presence of the Lord.

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CHAPTER 17
The Victorines

Boyd Taylor Coolman

The Abbey of Saint-Victor, "one of the major centers for biblical interpretation, theological reflection, spiritual guidance, and liturgical practice and innovation in the twelfth century and beyond" (Zinn, *Creation and Trinity* 9), was founded in Paris by William of Champeaux in 1108 and housed an Augustinian order of regular canons. The Victorines integrated forms of life increasingly segregated by their contemporaries: *clerical*, in ministries of preaching and pastoral care (see Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion* 23–30); *monastic*, communal life according to the so-called *Rule of St. Augustine*, and centered around the liturgy and oriented toward contemplation (see Fassler, *Gothic Song* 201–214); *scholastic*, pioneering the emerging academic discipline of theology and its pursuit of a systematic account of Christian truth. In a phrase, they were urban scholar-monk-priests (see Châtillon, *Le mouvement canonical* 293–296).

Broadly speaking, viewed over the course of its century-long evolution – from Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), through Achard (d. 1170/1171) and Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), to Thomas Gallus ("the Frenchman") of St. Victor (d. 1246) – the medieval Victorine mystical tradition emerged as an increasingly sophisticated conception of how the human is *capax Dei* (capable of God), that is to say, of how the human person prepares for, encounters, and responds to the experience of the presence of God (see McGinn *Growth of Mysticism* xi).[1] More precisely, in its most developed form this distinctive theological anthropology entails a dynamic dialectic of *ecstasis* and *enstasis*, which facilitates the divine–human relationship on the human side. *Enstasis* here denotes a movement toward, or a state of being *within*, the self; it is essentially self-establishing or constituting. *Ecstasis* means literally a movement "outside of," a "going out of," "above," or "beyond" the existing state or structure of the self; it is essentially self-exceeding. For the Victorines, these movements came increasingly to constitute the human: only in so far as the human exceeds itself, does it come to be itself, within itself (*ecstasis* results in *enstasis*); yet, to remain itself within itself, it must (again; continually)

exceed itself (*enstasis* results in *ecstasis*). One might say that here the *ecstatic* simply is the *enstatic*: the self-transcending is precisely the self-establishing. But by distinguishing these alternating "movements" in a single, continuous activity, it is apparent that the resulting *enstasis* is always a function of a prior *ecstasis*, such that the self constituted by such self-exceeding is always changed by it; it never simply returns to its original state, but is always in some way newly constituted or "re-formed," not as it was before, but always "for the better" (*in melius*).

This Victorine dialectic of *ecstasis* and *enstasis* was not seen as merely facilitating ideal human existence; it also rendered the human increasingly *capax Dei*, capable of profound intimacy with God. In other words, the Victorines increasingly integrated the moral and the mystical. Initially, the moral (defined here broadly as that which constitutes the human properly and ideally as such) is preparatory for the mystical (defined as an experienced encounter of the presence of God); that is, moral formation precedes and prepares the soul for mystical encounter with God. With Richard of St. Victor and in particular Thomas Gallus, though, the tradition began to see the ecstatic movement Godward as precisely that which constitutes the human ideally as such, thus in some sense integrating the moral and the mystical into a single activity of human existence.

While for the Victorines generally, such *en/ecstasis* was an anthropological notion, Thomas Gallus applied it to God. *Ad intra*, within the intra-Trinitarian divine life of the three Persons (where the Father wholly gives himself to the Son and Spirit), and *ad extra*, in relation to all that is not God (where the Trinity self-exceeds in relation to creation), the divine nature is ecstatic. Ultimately, this view of divine and human natures as essentially *ec/en-static* only becomes fully intelligible when God and human are viewed in reciprocal relation. While God as Trinity does not need the human in order to be en/ecstatically God, the human is not able fully to exist ecstatically unless and until related maximally (by deifying union) to God. That is, the divine and human are *ec/en-static* in relation to each other. For this reason, these medieval Victorines can consistently insist that the consummating *telos* of human being is divine indwelling, i.e., the human as enstatic locus of the presence of God, while also affirming that the human is drawn Godward to ecstatic participation in the divine life itself. Within this framework, other aspects of what is commonly thought to characterize the mystical experience find their place.

Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141)

Founder of the Victorine school in the early twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor has long been described as a mystic (see Healy, "Mysticism" 211–221; Lemoine, "L'abbaye de Saint-Victor" 109), though in this he is overshadowed by his successors, Richard of St. Victor and Thomas Gallus. Elements of his thought may indeed be termed "mystical" – e.g., his interest in *contemplatio*, descriptions of affective experience, the language of spiritual sensation, etc. – but relative to later Victorines these remain rather muted; he seldom offered first-person descriptions of mystical experience. His significance resides in the foundation he laid and the framework that he began to construct.

Hugh conceived of Christian existence as the gradual, ordered construction of the self as an *aedificatio* (edifice) or *templum Dei* (temple of God) (*On the Sacraments* 279), a dwelling place for the presence of God: "He will come to you in order to make a dwelling place in you,"(*On the Seven Gifts* 1) for God "cannot abide in us, unless He has first made Himself a dwelling in us" (*Ark of Noah* 124). This is accomplished through various practices that engage the whole person, intellectually and morally, body and soul, in a comprehensive and integrated fashion (see Coolman, *Theology*). Inaugurating a Victorine tradition of "symbolic theology," Hugh imaged this structural intuition variously in his writings, most famously with an allegorical interpretation of Noah's Ark as an image of the soul, "Now therefore, enter your own inmost heart, and make a dwelling place for God. Make Him a temple, make Him a house, make Him a palace, make Him an ark of the covenant, make Him an ark of the flood; no matter what you call it, it is all one house of God" (*Ark of Noah* 51). For the consummation of divine–human intimacy, Hugh combined this structural intuition with another twelfth-century mystical tradition that imaged God and the soul (or the church) in a nuptial relationship as Bridegroom-Bride. He thus saw the soul as a bridal chamber for the indwelling divine presence: "God is in the world as ruler of his kingdom; He is in the Church as head of a household; He is in the soul as a bridegroom in the wedding-chamber" (*Ark of Noah* 49). Such a soul is the truest, most intimate "house of God" (*Ark of Noah* 49).

In the intimacy of this wedding-chamber the mystical dimension of Hugh's theology is most evident under the notion of *contemplatio* – "the highest degree of perfection" (*Ark of Noah* 119): "The bridegroom is home when he fills the mind with interior joy; he goes away when he takes away the sweetness of contemplation" (*Praise of the Bridegroom* 125). *Contemplatio* has here the specific sense of a direct and immediate "loving knowledge" of God. For this, God created humanity in the first place: "God made humankind for Himself, not because He needed humankind, but so that humankind could enjoy Him" (*On the Three Days* 74). Pre-lapsarian humanity enjoyed this, delighting in God "by cognition" and "by love" (*On the Sacraments* 97). Post-lapsarian humanity needs to recover it, so as to arrive at beatitude: "There are two things by which the whole nature of the rational soul is disposed, namely, cognition and affection . . . If the soul completely obtains these and genuinely disposes [itself] with these, it is blessed" (*In Ecclesiastes* 141B–C). This contemplative beatitude is an experiential and "intimate taste of wisdom" (*In threnos Jeremiae* 291B), as Hugh indulged the ancient tradition of the spiritual senses of the soul: "For charity itself is wisdom, since by charity we taste God, and tasting we know him" (*Ark of Noah* 94). *Contemplatio*, moreover, is the means by which the rational creature experiences the "presence of God": "By always seeing Him he would thus always have loved Him, by always loving Him he would always have cleaved to Him, and, by always cleaving to Him who is immortal he too would have possessed in Him life without end" (*Ark of Noah* 46).

Mystical *contemplatio* is thus the horizon within which the "work of restoration" – the divine activity in history by which God restores fallen creation – occurs. Indeed, Hugh maintained a consistent eschatological reserve regarding contemplation. Knowledge of God in this life "is only a kind of image of that full and perfect cognition which afterwards we will drink up in contemplation" (*In hierarchiam* 950C–D). In the present there is only a foretaste, when "by a secret and familiar visitation" from God, the soul

"*in a fashion* begins to possess Him present through contemplation" (*On the Sacraments* 171). In this, the Beloved

> comes to touch you, not to be seen by you; he comes to stir you, not to be grasped by you; he comes not to pour himself completely into you, but to offer you a taste; not to fulfill your desire, but to elicit your affection (*affectum*) . . . He, who in the future will give himself to you to see and to possess unendingly, now sometimes offers himself to you as a foretaste so that you may recognize how sweet he is. At the same time, you are consoled meanwhile for his absence. (*Soliloquy* 228)

Despite this reserve, Hugh saw continuity between the labor of this present life and the contemplative rest of the next. This labor is the intellectual and especially moral preparation of the soul as bridal chamber to be the eschatological bride of the Bridegroom (Hugh uses both metaphors in his bridal mysticism). While dependent upon prior grace, moral re-formation is situated prior to the mystical union of divine indwelling for which it is a sanctifying preparation. The soul's re-formed beauty will eventually draw God into it as a Bridegroom to a Bride: What does your beauty signify, Hugh asks his own soul, except that God has been "preparing you as a bride for his bridal chamber" (*Soliloquy* 216).

For Hugh, then, the emphasis was primarily on the *enstatic* preparation for receiving the divine Lover. The soul must be re-formed and thus "capacitated" within to receive and "house" her Spouse, Who descends humanward to indwell (*Soliloquy* 219–220). In effect, the "movement" of divine–human interaction is consummated by this indwelling (*Praise of Charity* 165). In a rare autobiographical account, he offered a lapidary summary of his mystical theology:

> What is that sweet something that sometimes touches me when I remember him and affects me so strongly and pleasantly? Then, somehow, I begin to be completely alienated from myself and drawn away in some way. Suddenly I am renewed and completely changed, and I begin to experience a well-being that is beyond what I can describe. My conscience is joyful, all memory of the misery of past sorrows is forgotten, my mind exults, my understanding grows clear, my heart is illumined, and my desires are joyful. Then I see myself to be elsewhere, I do not know where. Interiorly, it seems as though I have hold of something in embraces of love. I do not know what that is, and nevertheless I work with all my might to keep it always and never lose it. My mind struggles in some kind of delight so that what I desire to embrace always may not leave it. As if it has found in it the object of all its desires, it exults deeply and ineffably, seeking nothing else, desiring nothing more, and always wanting to be thus. Is this my beloved? I ask, tell me, so that I may know if it is he, so that if he comes to me again, I may beg him not to leave but to remain forever. (*Soliloquy* 227)

Affective, intensely experiential, "spiritually sensuous," yet elusive, ineffable, fleetingly momentary, the interior reception and inward possession of the Beloved is the infinitely satisfying goal of human existence, a mere foretaste of which is available in this life.

Yet, this passage hints at something that seems best rendered *ecstatic* – "I begin to be completely alienated from myself and drawn away in some way." Elsewhere, this is even clearer:

> First he is in us and warns wrongdoers to return to their heart; then he is above us to invite those justified to himself. "Come," he says, "come." From outside come within to yourself. Then, within, come from within above yourself to me . . . You do not reach me, if you remain yourself. Rise above yourself. (*Praise of the Bridegroom* 128)

In a commentary he wrote on *The Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius, Hugh construed this ecstatic movement Godward as a kind of vehement alteration of the soul itself under the pressure of its own affective intensity. Prompted by the Dionysian text's description of the seraphim, Hugh depicted the soul not only as mobile, burning, and penetrating, but also as "boiling over." This image suggests to him a kind of "liquefication" of the soul on account of its intense affection – "liquefied and softened by the fire of love" (*In hierarchiam* 1038C) – which ultimately boils over and thus exceeds the soul itself: "If, therefore, such is the heat and sharpness of love, what do you think is that which follows: 'boiling over'?" (*In hierarchiam* 1039A–B). Pursuing the simile, Hugh notes how "that which boils with a kind of violence of its own heat and burning is thrown outside of itself and taken above itself" (*In hierarchiam* 1039B). Similarly, "in a marvelous way," when the soul "is taken up into that which is above him by the fire of love, it begins to be expelled and to depart even from himself through the force of love" (*In hierarchiam* 1039D). In this, love "despises all things by passing over," (*In hierarchiam* 1039C) and "crosses over and penetrates freely . . . running to the object of its desires" (*In hierarchiam* 1039A). So, in the bride's quest for loving union Hugh espies an act of affective self-transcendence, of the soul going above and beyond itself in loving ecstasy.

In sum, Hugh inaugurated the Victorine mystical tradition, not only by introducing certain themes (e.g., *contemplatio*, spiritual experience via the spiritual senses, integration of love and knowledge, nuptial imagery), but by establishing certain underlying principles which will shape the subsequent tradition: the use of biblical symbols for theological anthropology; the linking of moral formation and mystical consummation; and the intimations of ecstasy as central.[2]

Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173)

Richard of St. Victor has been called "the most significant of the Victorine mystics, both for the profundity of his thought and his subsequent influence on the later western tradition" (McGinn, *Growth* 398). A considerable literature has been devoted to his mystical teaching, which is only briefly adumbrated here (see Coulter, *Per Visibilia*). Typically Victorine was his strategy of figuring a sophisticated theological anthropology and the divine–human encounter it facilitates, in biblical figures and symbols, though his choice of these differs from Hugh's. Reflecting something of a "twelfth-century consensus" (Cistercian, Benedictine, and Victorine) regarding this anthropology (see McGinn, *Growth* 399), Richard thought the human soul is made according to

the divine *image* in its rational-intellectual capacity and to the divine *likeness* in its affective ability or love. Though deformed by sin, this dual capacity undergirds the human encounter with God. With Hugh, he situated the mystical dimension of Christian existence as the consummation of the moral life, which prepares the soul to encounter the divine presence in contemplation. In some contrast to his predecessors, though, he more strongly emphasized the ecstatic nature of mystical contemplation,[3] for which the moral re-formation is an enstatic preparation.

The basic pattern of enstatic, moral preparation for ecstatic, mystical consummation is evident in a key text, the *Twelve Patriarchs* (also known as *Benjamin minor* or *The Preparation of the Intellectual Soul for Contemplation*). There, Richard lays out a complex itinerary of the spiritual life through a moral (tropological) interpretation of the Old Testament figure of Jacob (representing the intellectual soul or *animus*), whose unions with Leah (*affectio*) and Rachel (*ratio*), along with their handmaids, Bala (*imaginatio*) and Zelpha (*sensualitas*), produce twelve sons, each of which represent the various moral and intellectual virtues the soul must acquire in order to reach mystical contemplation. The cumulative effect of the welter of details, reflecting "a subtle understanding of the psychology of progress in the spiritual life" (McGinn, *Growth* 403) is that these moral and intellectual virtues re-order and re-structure the rational image and affective likeness, such that within the soul itself (enstatically) the condition for the possibility of ecstatic, mystical encounter emerges. The penultimate son, Joseph, thus signifies the crucial virtue of discretion, which regulates and harmonizes all the other affective and rational virtues and in the end is nothing other than self-knowledge. In this way, the re-formed soul becomes a "mirror for seeing God" (*Twelve Patriarchs* 129). This movement Godward is symbolized by the birth of Benjamin in which Rachel (*ratio*) dies, signifying that this movement takes the soul "out of" and "above" itself (i.e., ec-static) to union with God: "Benjamin is born and Rachel dies, because when the human mind is carried above itself it passes beyond all narrowness of human reasoning. All human reason succumbs to that which the mind catches sight of from the light of divinity when it has been raised above itself and snatched up in ecstasy" (*Twelve Patriarchs* 131).

In his *The Mystical Ark*, "the most complete treatment of contemplation in the twelfth century" and "a new moment in the growth of Western mysticism" (McGinn, *Growth* 405), Richard develops in his own way Hugh's basic "structural-symbolic intuition," regarding the mystical encounter between God and the soul. Parallel to Hugh's use of Noah's Ark, Richard allegorizes the ark of the covenant that Moses had built in the Sinai desert (cf. Exodus 25), its construction and purpose, for his mystical teaching. In good Victorine fashion, this ark is his "master symbol" for figuring the divine–human relation. The profound complexity of this treatise, couched in a remarkably creative exploration of biblical images, is impossible to convey properly or even to summarize adequately here. It must suffice to remark on only the features most salient for our thesis.

The overriding theme of the treatise is *contemplatio* – what it is, how it comes about. The treatise appears to lay out a mystical *itinerarium*, a series of ordered, interrelated steps or stages through which the soul progresses in order to arrive at contemplation of the Trinity. Adopting a much-utilized Boethian[4] notion of human capacities for

knowing, Richard offered the following analysis. Contemplation begins with knowledge of sensible things (*sensibilia*), known by the soul's capacity to receive sensible impressions within itself (the *imaginatio*); from these it ascends to non-sensible, intelligible realities (*intelligibilia*), known by the soul's rational power, reason (*ratio*); finally, positing a capacity in the soul higher than reason, namely, the intelligence (*intelligentia*), the soul ascends to contemplation of God and God's nature/divine things (*intellectibilia*). Significantly, each of these forms of contemplation has two distinct modalities. In the first, each power (*imaginatio*, *ratio*, and *intelligentia*) functions properly, in the manner appropriate to the power itself; in the second, it begins to function in manner that relates it in some way to the power or stage above it. Thus *imaginatio* is taken up into *ratio*; *ratio* subsumed into *intelligentia*. Thus, on a micro-scale the signature Victorine notion of the movement from *enstasis* to *ecstasis* emerges: At each one of the six levels, the soul-power first acts within itself (enstatically) and then is drawn up out of itself (ecstatically) to the next.

At the same time, the entire schema entails a dynamic movement from enstatic to ecstatic mode of being. The first four levels of contemplation occur *within* the soul. Collectively, they effect an expansion of the soul (*dilatio mentis*), analogous to the enstatic self-construction noted above with Hugh. It involves a kind of training through spiritual exercise, "with much labor and great activity of soul" (*Mystical Ark* 303), by which the soul is "capacitated" (enlarged, strengthened) and its "high point of concentration" (*animi acies*) sharpened for direct contemplation for what follows. As above, the enstatic development comes to maturity with Richard's characteristic stress on self-knowledge at the transition to ecstatic contemplation. Sufficiently re-formed within (re-constructed as an ark of the covenant), the self is now sanctified to receive the *descending* and indwelling divine presence.

The transition from level four to the higher levels entails a genuinely ecstatic movement Godward, out of, above and beyond, the self. This entails an "elevation of the mind" (*sublevatio mentis*), which, though it requires human effort, relies increasingly upon grace. Here, the *intelligentia*, "when divinely inspired and irradiated by that heavenly light, is raised up, sometimes above knowledge, sometimes above activity, sometimes even above nature" (McGinn, *Growth* 411, n. 240). Yet, this *elevatio mentis* can give way to an even more radical form of ecstasis, namely, to an "alienation of the mind" (*alienatio mentis*), or in more traditional language, an *excessus mentis*. Importantly, at this ecstatic pinnacle, Richard shifts from the heretofore predominately intellectual orientation of the ascent (from *imaginatio*, to *ratio*, to *intelligentia*) to an affective orientation. Now the "flame of inner love" (*amoris intimi flamma*) is the primary "faculty/power" and anthropological "site" of divine–human encounter. In one sense, Richard here takes up a broader twelfth-century theme of the reciprocal interrelation between love and knowledge (summed up in the phrase *amor ipse intellectus est* – "love itself is understanding"); on the other hand, following Hugh (recall his "liqueficiation") and anticipating Gallus, Richard here gives a certain priority to love *over* knowledge at the apex of mystical ascent.

Indulging a Victorine penchant for triads, Richard finds three forms of *alientatio mentis*, and, reflecting both the emergent affective orientation and the *locus classicus* in the mystical tradition for its expression, namely, the Song of Songs, he associates each

with an aspect of that text. By the "greatness of devotion" (*magnitudo devotionis*) the "flame of love" so heats the mind as to liquefy it and it rises like smoke to God – "who is she who comes up through the desert like a column of smoke" (Sg. 3:6). By the "greatness of wonder" (*magnitudo admirationis*), the intellectual soul is so irradiated by lightning-flash of divine light that it forgets itself in awestruck wonder and rises Godward with desire – "who is she who comes forth like the dawn rising" (Sg. 6:9). By the "greatness of exultation (*magnitudo exultationis*)," associated with Song of Songs. 8:5: "Who is she who comes up from the desert, flowing with delights, leaning upon her Beloved,"

> the human mind is alienated from itself, when having drunk of the inner abundance of interior sweetness, indeed fully inebriated by it, the mind completely forgets what it is and what it has been and is carried on into an ecstasy of alienation by the excess of its dance and is suddenly transformed into a form of supermundane attraction (*affectus*) under the influence of a state of wondrous happiness. (*Mystical Ark* 334)

Among various traditional mystical themes here (e.g., interior sweetness, inebriation) this passage highlights the ecstatic culmination of the mystical ascent under the rubric of affectivity/love. While both are important, the ecstatic movement beyond the self pertains specifically to the ability of the *affectus* to go beyond reason and intellect.

Finally, in *The Four Degrees of Violent Love*, whose English title (perhaps better rendered "vehement") adumbrates both its orientation toward love/affectivity and the centrality of ecstasy, a new dimension clearly emerges, which will be more fully developed in the writings of Thomas Gallus. Richard describes the four degrees of love in various ways, based on his own reflections on the human experience of love (the "book of experience," rather than the books of Scripture or nature), as well as his speculative account of the nature of divine love within the Trinity. Though the terms and images vary, a consistent overall pattern emerges, especially at the end.

In the first degree, at God's prompting the soul "enters into itself" (*Four Degrees* 287), and though God "does not at all reveal his face" (*Four Degrees* 289), by meditation on the things of God, the soul is filled with delight and begins "to demand loftier things" (*Four Degrees* 289), and so "desires to experience what that internal sweetness might be that often intoxicates the mind, when one begins to 'taste and see how sweet the Lord is'" (*Four Degrees* 287). Here is the enstatic point of departure. In the second degree, grace gives flight to the desire born in the first degree so that it mounts up on the eagle's wings of contemplation and experiences marvelous delights (see *Four Degrees* 289–292). Now the soul moves *toward* God in thirst as it longs to see God in contemplation (see *Four Degrees* 287–289). In the third degree, the upward surge from within the soul exceeds the bounds of the self in an act of "jubilation" (*Four Degrees* 287), as the soul "passes into God completely" (*Four Degrees* 287); "the soul thirsts into God when, through ecstasy of the mind, it eagerly desires to cross entirely into God" (*Four Degrees* 287). The terminus of this ecstatic "passing over into the divine glory" (*Four Degrees* 292) is that like iron in a fire, the mind becomes liquefied (as with Hugh) and "incandescent . . . and becomes one spirit with God," its will having become fully identified with the divine will (*Four Degrees* 292–293).

Ecstatic union with God might seem to terminate the entire mystical process, as it appears in the earlier treatises. Yet, now Richard (borrowing, perhaps, from Bernard of Clairvaux) adds a fourth stage, with no prior analogue (see Chapter 16, this volume). Having become fully identified with the divine will, as liquid conforms to a container, "as if that divine will were a certain mold of consummate virtue to which it might be shaped" (*Four Degrees* 293), the soul now "adapts itself with spontaneous desire to each of God's decisions and forms its every wish in accordance with the measure of divine benevolence" (*Four Degrees* 293). This causes it to descend with God in loving compassion and service to neighbor,[5] as God did in the Incarnation: "just as a liquefied metal easily flows down into whatever passage is open to it, running toward the things that lie below, so the soul in this state voluntarily humbles itself to every act of obedience" (*Four Degrees* 293). This too is a kind of ecstatic movement, a second going out of the self; but, rather than a self-exceeding ascent Godward, this is a self-emptying (kenotic) descent humanward, following Christ (Philippians 2). The transition from the third to fourth degrees is likened to the death and resurrection of Christ. To be completely liquefied in love in the third degree so as to identify fully with the divine will is to die to one's old self; to descend with Christ is also to experience his resurrection and to become a new creature in him. The soul "liquefies entirely and passes away from its prior state completely" (*Four Degrees* 292).

Yet this descending valence "down" from ecstatic union implies that it is also a return to the self, an enstatic "congealing" movement back to self-possession. It is not, however, a return to the prior state but to a newly constituted moral state. There is an expansion, an improvement of the prior self. Richard couches this newness in terms of immortality and impassibility, conceived as the unflinching, unconquerable power of love for the other in the face of all adversity, resistance, suffering, even persecution (*Four Degrees* 294–295). This new mode of existence causes "a man dare to be more than a man," "entirely more than human," for "just as that to which he ascends through faith is above the human, similarly above the human is that to which he descends through patient endurance" (*Four Degrees* 296). Here, Richard's mystical theory acquires the pattern: moral enstasis followed by mystical ecstasis followed by (new) moral enstasis. Though he does not say so explicitly, it seems preferable to see here, not a unilinear ascent from self to God or an ascent from the soul to God where each degree is passed through and left behind ("as a train passes through stations"), but rather an iterative cycle or recurring sequence of steps that increasingly transforms the self.

Thomas (Gallus) of St. Victor (d. 1246)

Less famous than his predecessors, Thomas Gallus (the "Frenchman") or Thomas of St. Victor[6] is often seen as the "last of the great medieval Victorines." Trained at the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris in the early thirteenth century, Gallus was self-conscious heir to the theologies of Hugh and Richard. Yet, his lasting significance lies in the way that he synthesized this Victorine "Augustinianism" with the thought of pseudo-Dionysius (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume), contributing significantly to the Dionysian

revival occurring at this time and influencing profoundly the medieval interpretation of that tradition, both in the scholastic and non-scholastic contexts (see Coolman, "Affective Dionysian Tradition" 615–632).

Gallus' most innovative appropriation of Dionysian thought – and the most jarring for the modern reader – is also the most important for his mystical theology. Taking a cue from Dionysius himself, Gallus saw the Dionysian celestial hierarchy as having an anthropological corollary.[7] That is, he "angelized" the human mind or soul, following Dionysius' description of the nine angelic orders, subdivided into three triads, each with its own particular name, office, and activity (see *SC II* 66). The lowest triad (Angels, Archangels, Principalities) corresponds to the basic nature of the soul and its wholly natural activities. The middle triad (Powers, Virtues, Dominions) is the realm of nature assisted by grace, and involves "effort, which incomparably exceeds nature." The highest triad (Thrones, Cherubim, Seraphim) is the realm of grace above nature, and involves "ecstasy" in the literal sense of transcending the mind itself (*excessus mentis*) (*SC II* 67). While bizarre at first glance, Gallus' anthropological use of the angelic hierarchy is best seen as an instance of the general Victorine penchant for using iconic biblical symbols (e.g., for Hugh, Noah's ark; for Richard, the ark of Moses) as polyvalent, synthetic representations of all theologically significant reality (e.g., cosmos, history, Christ, church, soul). In light of the nearly Scriptural status afforded the *Corpus Dionysiacum* in the Middle Ages, Gallus' choice fits easily into this pattern. The angelic hierarchy is a kind of "master symbol" with which he conceives of the divine human relationship.

Gallus' angelized soul is literally a hierarchy in the Dionysian sense, namely, a dynamic structure of ascending-descending movements that mediates revelation from higher to lower and elevates the lower into the higher. This can be analyzed in three crucial "moments" or valences: ascending, descending, and (uniting them) circling or spiraling.

Ascending

The ascending valence in the soul traverses the path from the lowest to the highest angelic rank. The first triad (Angels, Archangels, Principalities) corresponds to the nature of the soul itself, which consists in "the basic and simple natural modes of apprehension, both of *intellectus* and *affectus*," whose mutual interaction begins a movement "leading them to the divine" (*SC II* 66). This interrelated activity is intensified in the middle hierarchy (Powers, Virtues, Dominions), where, by the "voluntary acts of both *intellectus* and *affectus*" the soul now seeks "the highest good with all the powers of *intellectus* and *affectus*" (*SC II* 66). Here, by considering visible things, the "mirror" of creatures, the middle hierarchy is "led back" and "up" to an intellectual understanding of God as the Artisan and Creator of all things. At this middle level there is also the now familiar notion of moral activity that is prerequisite for the mystical experience to follow (*SC III* 143). In the middle triad, all human activity reaches its natural limit. Still contained within itself (*enstasis*) and sober (*sobria*), the soul yet desires that which exceeds its capacities and, indeed, even its nature (*SC II* 67).

The transition from the middle to the highest hierarchy is a crucial "hinge" in the ascent. Having reached the limits of its natural capacities, even as aided by grace, the soul must now be raised "above" and "outside" itself (*ecstasis*). For Thomas, the enstatic labor in the lower and middle triads is preparatory for ecstatic reception in the highest triad. Not only has the acquisition of virtue made the soul apt for union, having purged the intellect of inferior forms of knowledge of God and the affect of lesser objects of its affection, but the "movements . . . of the affect and intellect" are "simplified (*simplificantur*)," contracted or drawn together (*SC II* 91). They are, moreover, "simplified *in order to be* extended (*ad extendum*) into the super-simple ray" (*SC III* 177) and "exercised" (*exercetur*) for receiving the "divine inpouring" (*divinos superadventus*) (*SC II* 67). Gallus evokes this emerging capacity of the soul with striking images. By this enstatic labor, the soul "hollows out" within itself "cavities" or "receptacles" of the mind (*sinus mentis*). The soul "extends upward (*sursumextendit*) every capacity of the mind (*omnes mentis sinus*) for receiving the divine light" (*SC III* 194). In short, the soul is now capacitated (stretched, extended, expanded) for receiving that which flows down from above.

Capacitated thus at the apex of the second or middle triad, the soul is now able to receive the inflowing divine presence. In receiving the divine Spouse the soul is drawn up above its nature ecstatically into the third and highest triad (Thrones, Cherubim, Seraphim). Gallus is here especially attentive to the relationship between knowledge and love (*intellectus* and *affectus*). Both are drawn upward together into the cherubic rank. But at "the consummation of its cognition and light" the intellect fails (*defectus intellectus*)(*SC III* 115). Only the "principal affection" (*affectus principalis*)[8] is able to proceed to the ninth and seraphic rank, where it alone is united to God (*SC III* 115) in the darkness of unknowing.[9] Here, in the ascending valence, is the familiar Victorine pattern of enstatic, moral preparation for ecstatic, mystical union.

Descending

It is often wrongly assumed that, in a straightforward manner, this affective seraphic union above intellective cherubic knowledge is the terminus of Gallus' mystical theology. Gallus, in fact, devoted extensive attention to movement in the opposite direction, namely, descent. In part, this derives from his striking affirmation that the divine nature itself entails an ecstatic impulse to move "out of" itself "downward" toward creatures. For Gallus, in "the holy and unified convolution of the Trinity" (*convolutione sancta et unice Trinitatis*), is an "eternal circle, moving through the Good, from the Good, in the Good, and to the Good" (*SC II* 67). There is thus a mutual and reciprocal divine–human ecstasy in mystical union: the "fullness of my divinity is always ready . . . to inflow (*influere*) minds" (*SC II* 102) and "divine love draws itself out to other minds and attracts them back to itself" (*SC III* 125). This descending valance in the divine nature itself "drives" and produces a parallel descending movement in the soul. The soul receives this divine self-bestowal hierarchically, mediated from higher to lower within itself, beginning with the experience of seraphic union: "the order of the seraphim first flows into (*influat*) the [orders of] the cherubim and thrones, and then into the inferior orders" (*SC II* 87).

To describe this, Gallus multiplies images: from seraphic union, "every true refreshment of the mind (*vera mentis refectio*) is transmitted into the inferior orders" (*SC II* 78); from it, "the most sweetly fragrant fervent love (*amor fervidus suavissime fragrans*), is distributed to the lower orders, according to their capacities" (*SC II* 75); from it like breasts (*ubera*) "are the in-flowings (*influitiones*) . . . into the inferior orders" (*SC II* 95); as a nourishing "light rain," this influx "refills (*replete*) and refreshes (*reficit*) every capacity (*sinus*)" of the mind that has been extended to receive it (*SC II* 78). On the basis of the Song verse – "your name is oil poured out" (Sg. 1:3) – the seraphic bride says that this oil of loving union is now poured out upon her whole soul, "cleansing, illumining, and healing" her "whole hierarchy" (*SC II* 69). In short, what the soul receives "above nature" in its ecstatic union with God "flows down" into the enstatic levels of its nature. Here, in this descending valence, there appears a movement similar to the return from mystical union back down to a new mode of enstatic existence, already noted in Richard.

Circling and spiraling

The significance of this descending valence is not small. Paired with the ascending valence, it brings the ecstatic experience of union with the divine Spouse "outside" the self and the enstatic activity "within" the self into dynamic interrelation. For the descending valence in effect instigates a new ascending valence. Seraphic union flows "back down" into and fecundates the lower orders according to their capacities – "made fecund, having been excited by the taste of divine sweetness" (*SC III* 124). Fecundated thus from above, the soul is stirred to re-ascend. Thus a perpetual "circulation" emerges. The soul-bride "will not cease to go after him – 'I will seek his face always' (Ps. 104) – by rising up . . . to 'circle around the city' (Sg. 3:2)" (*SC II* 85). For "the city" is "the super-infinite fullness of the deity, around which [human and angelic minds] are said to circulate (*circuire*) . . . by contemplating the invisible divine things with the highest loving, yet not penetrating intimately the divine depths; therefore, [such minds] are said to circle God (*circuire Deum*)" (*SC III* 166).

Fittingly, Gallus compared this circulation of the angelized soul to the angels descending and ascending a ladder in Jacob's vision: there is an "inflowing (*influitio*) of his light from the first order all the way to the last and a flowing back (*refluitio*) all the way back to the highest, according to that verse where Jacob saw the 'angels ascending and descending' (Genesis 28:12)" (*SC II* 101). In sum, "circular movements" (*motus circulares*) (*SC III* 137) are the signature activity of angelized souls. Ultimately, this circulatory activity seems to become a "spiraling" action of the whole soul *around God*. For in light of divine transcendence, which always exceeds human capacity (*SC III* 167), this intra-mental circulation is a never ending, constantly renewed movement around God – "circular turnings" (*circulares convolutiones*) lacking "beginning and end" (*SC III* 137). However much any "angelic or human mind is taken up . . . it is always circling (*circuibat*) . . ." (*SC III* 167).

In Gallus' mystical theology, accordingly, there appears the ascending movement of enstatic, moral preparation for ecstatic mystical union found in Hugh and Richard;

there is also the descending movement back to enstatic existence introduced by Richard. Gallus' innovation was to integrate these two movements into a single human activity, by conceiving of the soul's very nature as a hierarchical entity. As such, the soul is fundamentally a dynamic, multivalent (ascending-descending), structured state of being, in which the moral and the mystical are related in reciprocal and mutually reinforcing ways. The mystical emerges as the organic *telos* and consummation of the moral, in so far as the latter prepares and capacitates the soul to ascend and receive the divine presence, descending to indwell. Yet, the mystical also continually "funds" (fecundates, invigorates, stirs up) the moral, by "in-flowing" what it has received to the "lower" ranks of the soul, which thus renewed, seeks again to ascend to the mystical. Such a self also dynamically "accommodates" the ever-transcendent, ever-exceeding God, who indwells the soul precisely as the soul "expands" or "dilates" to go beyond itself to God.

In the end, precisely in so far as the soul is a hierarchy (in this Dionysian sense), these movements are continuous: the soul (ideally) is always *ascending* to the mystical and always *descending* to the moral. The hierarchized soul is not a simple itinerary, to be traversed from point to point; nor a ladder to be climbed and, its purpose served, discarded at the apex of the ascent. Rather, it is a dynamic state of being, a single, though multi-dimensional, activity.

Yet the hierarchized soul does more than dynamically integrate the moral and the mystical. As noted above, for Gallus the highest triad of the soul (thrones, cherubim, seraphim) is mysteriously and paradoxically both part of the soul and also above it. The soul's capacity for being drawn above and beyond itself ecstatically, accordingly, is in some sense part of its very nature within itself enstatically. Gallus in effect conceived the human as ecstatic *by nature*, such that "to go out of" the self is at once both self-transcending and self-constituting – in exceeding itself, the soul becomes more fully itself; in going out, it arrives more fully within. If the moral can be defined as that which constitutes the human ideally, then with Gallus mystical *ecstasis* is enstatically constitutive of the human.

Finally, in so far as it engages in this activity, the soul is rendered *capax Dei*, because in so doing the soul comes to resemble the divine nature, which itself is perfectly constituted ecstatically within itself by the eternally ecstatic self-giving and receiving among the Trinity of Persons. In fact, one could say that with Gallus the Victorine mystical tradition emerged at the interstices of divine and human *ecstasies*: the divine and human interact at the intersection of their ecstatic self-expression.

Conclusion

In sum, from Hugh to Richard to Thomas of St. Victor, an arc of increasingly complex theological anthropologies emerged, figured through biblical symbols, by which the mystical dimension of Christian existence is understood. With Hugh, moral formation re-forms the soul enstatically, after the fashion of Noah's ark to be a structure capable of receiving the descending, divine presence. For Richard, too, progress in the moral life re-structures the soul to house the divine presence, now in the manner of the ark of Moses. Yet Richard increasingly emphasized, not only the human response, in which

the human is drawn up beyond itself ecstatically Godward, but also introduces a subsequent descending movement of enstatic return to the moral life. With Thomas, finally, a master symbol emerged with the Dionysian angelic hierarchy that is capable of integrating (not merely linking) the moral and the mystical, the ascending and descending, the ecstatic and enstatic within a single, unified conception of the soul as a dynamic, multivalent state of existence in relation to God. Summing up a profound Victorine intuition, for Gallus the mystical is constitutive of the fully human.

The influence of these three Victorines on later medieval mystical writers was both deep and wide. Later, when in the thirteenth century St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) surveyed the luminaries of the recent and remote Christian tradition, he observed that, while Augustine and Anselm excelled in speculative theology, and Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux in practical morality, and Dionysius and Richard of St. Victor in mystical contemplation, Hugh of St. Victor, "excels in all three."[10] Indeed, Richard was the Victorine mystic par excellance in the later Middle Ages, overshadowing the generalist Hugh and the obscure Gallus. But Hugh was widely read by mystical and non-mystical writers alike (see Zinn, "Vestigia"). For his part, Gallus would become the primary architect of a late medieval mystical tradition, centered around an affective interpretation of the Dionysian corpus, which became "a potent new mystical theory that had a major influence in the later Middle Ages" (McGinn, "Thomas Gallus" 82) influencing such mystical classics as *The Cloud of Unknowing* (see Chapter 24, this volume).

Notes

1   See the fuller accounts of Victorine mysticism found in McGinn, *Growth*, pp. 363–418 (for Hugh and Richard) and McGinn, *Flowering* 78–87 (for Thomas Gallus).
2   Feiss, "Introduction," *On Love* 121: "Hugh's spirituality is "not so much about ecstatic union with God as it is about the sort of life that leads to such unitive love."
3   As McGinn puts it, "a systematic teaching about mystical ecstasy rare among twelfth-century thinkers" (*Growth* 403).
4   Boethius (c. 480–524 or 525) was a Christian philosopher who influenced later medieval thinkers.
5   *Apoc*. 7.6 (PL 196.871D): "Whoever burns with these desires is also filled with mercy and compassion for others."
6   For a survey of Gallus' life and works, see Barbet, "Thomas Gallus" and Théry.
7   Gallus developed this in his two commentaries on the Song of Songs, edited by Barbet, *Thomas Gallus: Commentaires du Cantique des Cantiques* 65–104 and 105–232 (hereafter abbreviated as *SC II* and *SC III* respectively, followed by page designations in the critical edition). All translations are mine, except where otherwise noted.
8   Or the "*scintilla synderesis*," the "spark of the soul" (*SC III* 219), the "high point of affection" (*apex affectionis*). See McGinn, "Thomas Gallus," 88–89, n. 26.
9   Whether there is an "affective cognition" of God at the seraphic level is a question that cannot be pursued here, except to note that Gallus claims that here, through its spiritual senses, the soul smells, touches, and tastes God. See Coolman "Thomas Gallus".
10 Bonaventure.

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CHAPTER 18

The Mystery of Divine/Human Communion in the Byzantine Tradition

George E. Demacopoulos

The western academic understanding of "mysticism" has only slight connection to the medieval Greek connotation of *mysterion* (μυστήριον), which meant, quite simply, a "mystery," "something secret," or "something unknowable." The Byzantines did not employ the term *mysticos* as a technical term or category of religious practice as some medieval western thinkers did, nor did they separate mystical experience from theological reflection as some scholars have characterized a western bifurcation that began with scholasticism. Rather, Byzantine authors used the term in the context of the unknowability of God, often as a referent to or endorsement of the apophatic theological approach. The discontinuity between modern terms and Byzantine expression, however, does not mean that the Byzantine religious imagination was in anyway lacking what we moderns would call a mystical tradition. On the contrary, Byzantine Christianity produced one of the richest mystical traditions in Christian history. For the purpose of this essay, then, I will interpret the word "mysticism" to refer to the relevant categories of thought that capture the Byzantine understanding of the mystery or, perhaps more properly, the "hidden mystery" of divine/human communion. At its core, Byzantine theology was an attempt to understand and articulate the divine/human relationship; the mystery or "hiddenness" of that relationship to human comprehension is an element of all Byzantine theological reflection.[1] Because complete knowledge of God was believed to be an impossibility (cf. Gregory Nazianzen, Pseudo-Dionysius, et al.) (see Chapter 11, this volume), most Byzantine commentators derived their understanding of divine/human communion from two fully interwoven strands: (1) doctrinal conviction that had its source in revelation; and (2) a lived experience rooted in ascetic purification, prayer, and contemplation.

The following essay begins with a summation of the key late-ancient thinkers who provided the intellectual categories for Byzantine mystical reflection and development. It then examines the insights of three important figures: Maximus the Confessor,

Symeon the "New" Theologian, and Gregory Palamas. Although these were but three theologians in a rich and diverse thousand-year Christian tradition, they more than others directly shaped the Byzantine mystical traditions and continue to inform eastern Christian mystical reflection in the modern world. The essay concludes with a brief reexamination of Vladimir Lossky's enormously influential *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, originally published in Paris in 1944, and considers the ways in which its narration of the Orthodox mystical tradition was self-consciously framed as a response to and critique of western theology (see Chapter 32, this volume).

The Legacy of Origen, Evagrius, the Cappadocians, and Dionysius

The Byzantine mystical traditions were simultaneously derivative and innovative: derivative, in that many of the concepts, terms, and authoritative resources for theological reflection were in place well before the sixth century; innovative, in that the way that theologians expressed the un-knowability of God and attempted to explain the mystery of divine/human communion continued to develop in diverse and controversial ways throughout the Byzantine period.

Origen of Alexandria (d. c. 254) (see Chapters 9 and 10, this volume) was one of the earliest authors to explore the mysteries of God in detail. His famous distinction between the literal (surface) meaning of Scripture and the spiritual (hidden/mystical) meaning of Scripture effected more than a difference in exegetical styles; it introduced the idea that the meaning of biblical texts, because they were the revelation of God, were, like God, shrouded in mysteries that only a select few could begin to comprehend. Through a combination of grace and human freedom, a Christian could, Origen reasoned, not only unlock some of the mysteries of Scripture but also ascend toward God through contemplation and ascetic purification. The mystery of divine transcendence as well as the affirmations of human freedom, ascetic practice, contemplation, and spiritual ascent, all traceable to Origen, are foundational elements of all medieval mystical theology including, of course, the Byzantine.

Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) was dependent upon Origen in certain ways, but he made many important contributions of his own to the Byzantine mystical tradition (see Clark). His surviving writings characterize the soul's journey as one that begins with the pursuit of ascetic *apatheia* (passionlessness), progresses to divine *theoria* (contemplation), and culminates in *gnosis* (knowledge of the divine). Susanna Elm has compellingly argued that Evagrius described the final stage of *gnosis* as being something available to male ascetics only. The entire journey, an ascetic journey, is one of ceaseless prayer (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17) that becomes imageless prayer for the advanced practitioner (see Katos). Evagrius introduced the concept of the eight *logosmoi* – demonic temptations in the form of thoughts that distract the soul from contemplation. In certain re-workings in the middle ages, Evagrius' eight *logosmoi* became the seven vices or seven deadly sins. He also introduced the literary genre known as the spiritual century – pithy numbered catechetical statements of discipline and moral philosophy based upon ascetic principles. That Evagrius was important for subsequent Byzantine thinkers is undisputed, but the extent of his direct influence has been debated, with

some arguing that his ideas were primarily appropriated through sanitizing filters (John Cassian, for example, replaced Evagrius' end-stage of *gnosis* – a controversial category in the fifth century – with the goal of purity of heart, which enabled divine/human communion) (see Chapter 15, this volume).

It was the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen) (see Chapter 11, this volume), however, who were the most often cited authorities for later Byzantine mystics. Not only were they important mystical writers in their own right, but their influence was also so profound and their authority so unquestioned that many otherwise controversial ideas originating in pre-Christian Greek philosophy or with Origen were both directly and indirectly passed to the Byzantine church through the Cappadocians. Basil (d. 379) and Nazianzen (d. 389), for example, authored a compilation of Origen's teachings, known as the *Philokalia*. Although they certainly did not adopt all of Origen's teaching, even some of the Alexandrian's more problematic ideas can be found in the Cappadocian corpus, such as Nyssa's belief (cf. *On the Soul and Resurrection*, in Werner) in the *apokatastasis* (i.e. the restoration of all souls to God).

Like Origen and other Neoplatonists, the Cappadocians held that God was a transcendent mystery, hidden from human comprehension. But God made Godself known, and enabled divine/human communion, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through ascetic discipline and contemplation performed in retreat, one could gain some knowledge of the divine. The acquisition of this knowledge of God, in fact, was what separated those who could and those who could not speak authoritatively in theological disputes (Nazianzen, *Orations* 2 [Bernardi], 27 and 28 [Gallay]; see Demacopoulos 2005). It was within similar epistemological parameters that the Cappadocians offered their views on balancing the *apophatic* and *cataphatic* approaches to God.

Though most of their theological reflection emerged in midst of the Trinitarian controversies, the Cappadocian response to those controversies provided important precedents for subsequent theological reflection, which in turn helped to set the foundations for Byzantine mystical reflection. For example, Gregory of Nyssa's argument for the infinity of God (originally advanced to protect the Father/Son distinction) helped to transform the way that the Byzantines described the soul's ascent to God (see Weedman). Whereas Origen's Christian grew in knowledge of God through intellectual illumination, Nyssa's Christian continues in his ascent but never closes the gap between himself and God, never gains real knowledge. Rather, Nyssa describes the mystical ascent to God as a continuous escalation, perhaps a never-ending pursuit, into the divine darkness. Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, a spiritualizing interpretation of the Hebrew text that draws on both Philo's and Origen's earlier analyses, is the example *par excellence* of late-ancient mystical reflection.

It was pseudo-Dionysius (an anonymous sixth-century author) (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume) who developed the concepts of apophatic theology and divine darkness the most fully (Louth 2008a) His brief *Mystical Theology* is the quintessential early Byzantine statement of the mystical concept of seeking knowledge of God through darkness and unknowing.[2] Dionysius was the first author to use the phrase "mystical theology," by which he meant that the knowledge of God was completely governed by God's self-disclosure through the Scriptures and the historical incarnation of Jesus

Christ. Even more than the Cappadocians, he insisted that cataphatic knowledge of God could only be obtained through these forms of revelation and insisted that all other epistemological insights were obtained exclusively from the apophatic approach.

Though Dionysius shares many neo-Platonist ideas with Origen (e.g. God's recalling of all creation to himself), some aspects of his mystical theology were decidedly different. Perhaps most significantly, he incorporated the sacramental life of the church, describing the divine/human communion that occurs in the sacraments as mysteries. Indeed, the Byzantine term for the sacraments was *mysteria* – a conceptualization rather different from the scholastic envisioning. In effect, Dionysius affirmed in a creatively new way what the Cappadocians had previously introduced – that although the mystery of God was a mystery (even to the angels), it became real through the incarnation of Jesus Christ and is present in the eucharist and other sacraments (Louth 2008a).

Dionysius also introduced the word hierarchy to theological investigation. According to Andrew Louth, what Dionysius means by the cosmic hierarchy is not exclusion or separation (as we tend to interpret the word), but rather a radiant display that reaches out from God through the whole created order, drawing that order back to the divine. In other words, hierarchy becomes for Dionysius a way of uniting the created order with the creator (Louth 1996). To understand the process of that union, Dionysius follows Evagrius in affirming the triad of *praxis-theoria-gnosis* and, like Evagrius, understands the triad to be predicated upon ascetic withdrawal. For Dionysius, however, the endpoint of *gnosis* serves as more of an occasion of divine/human communion, anticipating (more fully than Evagrius) the subsequent Byzantine emphasis on *theosis* (deification).

Whether directly or indirectly, each of these authors provided the foundational concepts of mystical theology that Byzantine authors would further elaborate and integrate. Although the Byzantines would not always agree with one another about how best to describe the mystery of divine/human communion, they never really questioned the fundamental theological conviction that God does, mysteriously, interact with humanity and that it is only through this interaction that humans come to know anything about God and God's mystery.

The Syntheses of Maximus the Confessor

Maximus the Confessor (580–662) was a Greek ascetic and theological writer who spent much of his adult life in the Christian west (mostly in Carthage but also in Rome).[3] Of all Byzantine theologians, he might have been the most creative and influential. Not only did he synthesize a great deal of Christian theology that preceded him, but his summation that all theology should be focused on the mystery of the incarnate Christ – a mystery that both enables divine/human communion and allows knowledge of God – served as an important referent for all mystical reflection that was to follow him.

Scholars almost universally view Maximus as a synthetic thinker and reluctant theologian (see Blowers 1991; 2003). Despite his reputation as the defender of Orthodoxy against *Monotheletism*, Maximus spent most of his career as a practicing ascetic

far removed from the turmoil of theological controversy. Thus, the majority of his writings were either asceticizing "centuries" in the Evagrian tradition or responses to questions concerning passages in Scripture and the Fathers.[4] In both cases, Maximus' work should be viewed as that of a spiritual master attempting to assist his readers in the spiritual ascent toward God. As Paul Blowers has carefully demonstrated, Maximus' approach was never overtly dogmatic but predominantly one of concern for the spiritual welfare of his disciples (Blowers 1991). Even Maximus' analysis of Scripture was not meant to be exegetical in the proper sense, but rather to serve as a tool for encouraging a form of ascetic contemplation that leads to *theosis*. For example, following in the tradition of Origen, Maximus repeatedly encouraged his disciples to pursue the spiritual or mystical meaning of Scripture, at one point suggesting that the literal interpretation of Scripture was akin to the body, whereas the spiritual interpretation of Scripture harkened to the soul (*Mystagogy* 6).

Maximus might also be described as someone who combined the apophatic sophistication of Dionysius with the ascetic theology of Evagrius. Maximus' dependence upon Evagrius (and Origen), however, is more inferential than direct (see Dalmais). Some scholars have quibbled over the extent to which Maximus was derivative of Dionysius. Meyendorff, for instance, wanted to distance Maximus from Dionysius, arguing that the former employed only a "sanitized" form of the latter) (see Louth 1993; 2008b). Paul Rorem's analysis seems an apt middle-way in that he argues that Maximus refines Dionysius' extreme apophaticism by turning it to an incarnational/Christological purpose.[5] But it was Gregory Nazianzen who most often served as Maximus' authority of record.[6]

Among the important syntheses of Maximus' work, perhaps the most significant for subsequent Byzantine authors was the way that Maximus combined the desert spirituality of the Egyptian tradition (primarily that of Evagrius but also of Pseudo-Macarius) with the theological precision of the Cappadocians. Long before the Monothelite controversy demanded Maximus' articulation of a dual-will theology, he had already developed a remarkable aptitude for employing Chalcedonian language, creatively but intuitively, in his ascetic treatises. As we will see, Maximus' interpretation of the mystery of the incarnation (along with its implications for divine/human communion) was the hermeneutical key for his entire theological outlook. In this regard, Maximus' integration of the mystical writers who preceded him and his development of their ideas is one of the greatest theological achievements of eastern Christian theology. Maximus had a theological creativity that few have ever shown, and yet he was able to produce such important syntheses of other authors (some of whom had already been condemned by the church) without compromising the terminological or conceptual Orthodoxy to which he was so committed.

Like Gregory Nazianzen before him, Maximus' theological achievement was in large part due to his embracing the concept of divine paradox, divine mystery. For Maximus, all theology is a mystery, something hidden from human comprehension. Whatever can be known by theology – known of God – must be discerned from the standpoint of the mystery that is Jesus Christ, particularly with reference to the mystery of the incarnation. Examining the importance of the incarnation, he avers, "this is the great and hidden mystery, at once the blessed end for which all things have been ordained.

It is the divine purpose conceived before the beginning of created things" (*Ad Thalassium* 60).

Thus, it is the paradox of Christ in particular that gives shape to Maximus' mystical theology. In *Ad Thalassium* 60, he begins by interpreting Colossians 1:26 ("the hidden mystery from the ages having now been manifest") as referring to the mystery of Christ, which is rooted in the ineffable and incomprehensible hypostatic union between Christ's divinity and his humanity. "This union draws his humanity into perfect identity, in every way, with his divinity, through the principle of *hypostasis*; it is a union that realizes one *hypostasis* composite of two natures, inasmuch as it in now diminishes the essential difference between those natures" (*Ad Thalassium*). Maximus embraces Chalcedonian definitions but does so without neglecting the mystery to which the definitions point. The Christological confession of two natures, like the Trinitarian confession of three hypostases is, ultimately, one of faith predicated upon the mystery of the transcendent God. And, yet, it is precisely because God made himself human, through the incarnation, that we are able to know something of him.

Indeed, it is because Christ became human – that he shares humanity with us – that we are able to know anything of the mystery of Christ, the mystery of God. "You should investigate," he writes in *Ambiguum* 42, "what is the mode according to God's disciplinary economy, of Christ's birth on account of human sin, the goal of which is the correction of disciplined humanity and humanity's complete return to the true principle of its creaturely origin, such that humanity might clearly learn how God, in becoming man, was perfectly begotten both in terms of his creaturely origin and his birth, and that it was indeed for humanity that Christ maintained the *logos* of the creaturely origin while also wisely restoring humanity's means of existing to its true *logos*" (*Ambiguum* 42).

Similarly, it is because Christ became human – that he possessed a human body – that our bodies have the possibility of healing and of returning to their pre-lapsarian condition. Though post-lapsarian bodies are broken and broken in diverse ways, the mystery of Christ's incarnation enables the brokenness of human bodies to be made whole once again (cf. *Ambiguum* 8). Embellishing the Athanasian insight that God became human so that humans could become gods, Maximus notes: "By his gracious condescension God became man and is called man for the sake of man and by exchanging his condition for ours revealed the power that elevates man to God through his love for God and brings God down to man because of his love for man. By this blessed inversion, man is made God by divinization and God is made man by hominization. For the Word of God and God wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of his embodiment" (*Ambiguum* 7).

Building on the Cappadocians and Dionysius, Maximus integrates the theology of the incarnation with the mysteries of the sacramental life of the church, especially those of eucharist and baptism. Indeed, his *Mystagogy* offers a spiritualizing and allegorical interpretation of each of the liturgical components of the eucharistic service. According to Maximus, each aspect of the Divine Liturgy represents the cosmic journey of the soul to God beginning with the denial of the passions, growing in the grace of divine contemplation, and then reaching to the culmination of "seeing by a divine perception with the undaunted eyes of the mind" the summits of theology, wherein

God is one nature of three hypostases (*Mystagogy* 23).[7] Here, the church itself is understood to possess mystically the same activity as God (as an image reflects its archetype) (*Mystagogy* 1), to represent the meeting of heaven of earth (*Mystagogy* 2–3), and to bring unity to the massive diversity and brokenness of humanity (*Mystagogy* 1). Baptism, also, receives a mystical re-conceptualization in Maximus' thought. While Basil of Caesarea had discussed the mystical transformation of the Christian that occurs by the power of the Holy Spirit during baptism, his interest had primarily been to defend the worship of the Spirit. Maximus somewhat differently develops Basil's insight to emphasize the mystical change that occurs for the Christian, describing it as the necessary first-step in the process of salvation and deification (*Ambiguum* 42). And, for Maximus, this change is directly (albeit mystically) linked to the ontological change that the incarnation enables for humanity.

Perhaps the most significant of Maximus' contributions to Byzantine mystical theology that will distinguish it from the medieval west were his concentrated emphasis on deification (*theosis*) and the language he provides for linking deification to the incarnation.[8] Particularly innovative is Maximus' description of the body as an instrument for deification. "The soul becomes godlike through divinization, and because God cares for what is lower, that is the body, and has given command to love one's neighbor, the soul prudently makes use of the body. By practicing virtues the body gains familiarity with God and becomes a fellow servant with the soul" (*Ambiguum* 7). A few lines later, he adds, "The result is that what God is to the soul the soul becomes for the body, and the one God, Creator of all, is shown to reside proportionately in all beings through human nature" (7). The emphases on the goodness of the body and that the body is made good by the incarnation, mark an important distancing from Platonism and Origen and anticipate, in many important ways, one of the chief claims of Gregory Palamas and his fellow hesychasts. Connected with the physicality of deification, of course, is Maximus' use of the categories of experience and sensation when describing *theosis*.[9] In *Ad Thalassium* 6, for example, he refers to the "cognizant experience of deification."

Whatever may be said of Maximus' mystical theology, its synergies and innovations, there is no denying its ascetic dimensions nor the extent to which he imparted to subsequent generations the fundamental link between ascetic pursuit and the possibility of deification. Maximus did not believe that sanctity was something that belongs exclusively to the ascetic elite (as some in the Egyptian tradition had held). But asceticism for Maximus provided a path to sanctity that all Christians were able and required to pursue. Thus, for Maximus, asceticism serves as a response to God's presence – both in the incarnation and in the sacraments.

Following in the tradition of Evagrius and Pseudo-Macarius, Maximus argues that asceticism is required of all humans in the sense that all humans must aspire to practice (*praxis*) and contemplation in a way that leads both body and soul (jointly) to seek union through deification. Maximus' contribution, once again, surfaces with respect to the mystery of the incarnation. The incarnation, he argues, inaugurates the transformation of human possibility so that our fallen nature can actually become a resource, through asceticism, for personal communion with God (*Ambiguum* 7 and *Ad Thalassium* 21). In other words, the incarnation allows humanity, mystically, to

transform the passions into virtue by returning to a pre-lapsarian mode that enables deification. Once again, Maximus' emphasis on the incarnation permeates his mystical theology.

In the eighteenth century, a pair of Athonite monks put together an important anthology of Byzantine texts, known as the *Philokalia*, which was designed to be a primer in the contemplative life. Of the many monastic and mystical authors contained in the collection, none is quoted more often than Maximus the Confessor (Louth 1998). As we will see in what follows, both Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas drew heavily on Maximus' insights. What Maximus bequeathed to future generations was the linking of the mystery of the incarnation to the mystery of divine/human communion through asceticism. Since the seventh century, some Orthodox writers have situated the locus of that communion in the sacramental life, others have posited that it can be taught by spiritual masters, and others still have found it in repetition of the name of Jesus. But all Orthodox writers since the seventh century have defended their position with recourse to the mystical theology of Maximus the Confessor.

Symeon the New Theologian and Mystical Pedagogy

Perhaps there is no Byzantine mystic who remains more controversial than Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022). Even the significance of his epithet, the New Theologian, remains a source of debate (see Alfeyev). Symeon was born to a wealthy family and educated in Constantinople. At a young age, he abandoned a promising political career to become a monk at the famous Constantinopolitan monastery, Studios, under the influence and spiritual mentoring of Symeon Eulabes. He moved from Studios to St. Mamas a few years later where he became the abbot but was resisted by many of his subordinates and ran afoul of the ecclesiastical elite in Constantinople who condemned and exiled him.[10] Symeon was eventually exonerated and permitted to build a small monastery dedicated to St. Marina, but it was only after his death that his teaching gained wide approval.[11]

In part, Symeon's troubles related to what was perceived by others to have been an excessive veneration and dependence upon his spiritual father, Symeon Eulabes. One can find in Symeon's writings, for example, the claim that authentic spiritual insight belongs exclusively to a small group of spiritual mentors who are able to confer the mysteries of divine/human communion to their disciples. The implication is that this chain of spiritual mentors runs parallel to but distinct from a less viable chain of authority rooted in apostolic succession and possessed by the episcopate. Thus, the ecclesiastical elite are authorities in name only, because they have forsaken the authentic life of ascetic discipline and spiritual enlightenment (see Maloney, P. McGuckin).[12] Symeon, of course, claimed that his own spiritual mentor, Symeon Eulabes (who had never been ordained), was one of these inspired directors and the New Theologian attributed every insight that he possessed to the instruction and prayers of Eulabes. Symeon's resistance to episcopal authority was not novel – similar condemnations of episcopal corruption fill the works of late-ancient and Byzantine ascetic writers. But the measure to which Symeon attributed his own encounters with God to the interces-

sion and instruction of his mentor did reflect a new focal point in the Byzantine mystical tradition. As we will see, Symeon added to this emphasis a remarkable first-person description of the sensual experience of *theosis*.

Symeon's surviving corpus comprises centuries, discourses, theological treatises, hymns, and a few letters. His direct audience was almost exclusively monastic, probably his own community. Like Maximus, Symeon was able to integrate many of the traditions that preceded him but also to contribute his own insights that would have a lasting influence in the eastern Christian tradition. Showing an affinity for the teaching of John Climacus (a seventh-century abbot at Sinai and author of the famous *Ladder of Divine Ascent*) and a former Studite master, Theodore the Studite (759–856), Symeon stressed the importance of confession and repentance. But whereas Climacus and Theodore had understood repentance to be a pre-requisite for spiritual growth, Symeon described repentance as an advanced form of spirituality in itself. He further democratized the virtue of repentance (and the deification enabled by repentance) by insisting that it could be obtained alongside even a beginner's asceticism, so long as the beginner possessed the humility required for true repentance. In a famous passage from his *Discourse* 16, Symeon describes his first experience of deification, brought on not by rigorous asceticism but by recalling his sins and adhering to the precise instructions of his elder (who had actually encouraged the young Symeon to break his fast). It is noteworthy that Symeon experienced deification prior to his becoming a monk – the turn to monasticism was thus a response to (rather than a cause of) divine/human communion.

Not only does Symeon provide provocative first-person accounts of *theosis*, his descriptions are full of thick, sensual characteristics emphasizing a tangible experience of God. *Discourse* 16 provides a prime example: "at once, I saw, and behold, a great light was immaterially shining on me and seized hold of my whole mind and soul, so that I was struck with amazement at the unexpected marvel and I was, as it were, in ecstasy. Moreover, I forgot the place where I stood, who I was, and where, and could only cry out, 'Lord have mercy' " (*Discourse* 16). A little later he adds, "Whether I was in the body or outside the body, I conversed with this Light. The Light itself knows it; it scattered whatever mist there was in my soul and cast out every worldly care." Then a little further still he continues, "it seemed to me as though I was stripping myself of a garment of corruption. Besides there was poured into my soul in unutterable fashion a great spiritual joy and perception and a sweetness surpassing every taste of physical objects, together with a freedom and forgetfulness of all thoughts pertaining to this life." Whereas some interpreters have viewed Symeon's first-person narratives as representing a turn toward an individualistic spirituality that was divorced of community and church, John McGuckin has compellingly shown how the great majority of Symeon's hymns are set in the context of, and make multiple allusions to, the eucharistic miracle. The Dionysian-like emphasis on the eucharist as the location of divine/human communion is framed in Symeon's hymns as a dialogue between the soul and the bridegroom (*Hymns* 15).

More than any other Byzantine author, Symeon gives shape and contour to the experience of divine/human communion. He explains in remarkable detail the transformation of the parts of the body that occurs through deification – indeed, his description of the deification of the genitals must have been rather scandalous for his time

(*Hymns* 15). Like Maximus, Symeon views the paradox of the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures, made possible by the incarnation, as the means by which the soul can experience God directly. For Symeon, humanity's ability to experience God is the very basis of divine/human interaction and to deny it (to insist on the utter transcendence of God) is to make the incarnation meaningless. And although he offers the richest of all Byzantine accounts of what occurs during deification, Symeon typically seeks to describe the ineffable nature of the encounter through poetic metaphor. For the person who has never experienced God, these metaphors are meaningless and confusing; for the illuminated who have had the experience, it is presumed that they will understand immediately what Symeon seeks to describe (e.g. Hymn 1 in Koder). Thus, Symeon's apophaticism is not so much an insistence that God cannot be known as it is an inability to name or articulate an experience of God that can be known but not fully described.

New and Old in Hesychast Mysticism

For our purposes, it is important to differentiate as much as possible the mystical theology of the hesychasts from the political controversies in which leading hesychasts became involved. Hesychasm (see also Chapter 32, this volume) stems from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning silence or stillness, and was taken by mid- and late-Byzantine ascetics to relate to the cultivation of an interiorized spiritual silence of the heart, theoretically free of images and discursive thinking. In its mature form, hesychasm is often understood to include a number of specific spiritual methods designed to help achieve that stillness of heart. Most important of these was the repetition of the *Jesus Prayer*: "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." By the twelfth century, novices in many monastic communities (especially those on Mt. Athos) were encouraged to combine the *Jesus Prayer* with physical stillness and controlled breathing to maximize the concentration on the name of Jesus. The advocates of hesychasm claimed that this process, combined with the grace of God, could lead to an experience of God, most often described as an infusion or vision of an ecstatic Divine Light, similar to what was experienced by the apostles during the Transfiguration (cf. Matthew 17). With time, *theosis* by means of the Divine Light was defined as a mystical, rapturous, and sensual experience of the uncreated energies of God – a definition that is often taken to be the crowning point of the Byzantine articulation of the experience of deification.

The origins of the prayer method are uncertain but the earliest surviving testimony dates to Diadochos of Photike (Epiros, fifth century) and John Climacus (Sinai, early seventh century), both of whom emphasized invoking the name of Jesus in the pursuit of imageless prayer. In many important ways, then, the tradition began with Evagrius, who had first encouraged his disciples to pursue imageless noetic prayer. Evagrius and his one-time mentor, Gregory Nazianzen, had also introduced the concept of divine light. A form of "light" mysticism, the concept of the divine light was foundational for later Byzantine mystics, such as Symeon the New Theologian (who surprisingly never mentions the Jesus Prayer) and the hesychasts.

In the later Byzantine period, the Athonite monks Nikiphoros the Hesychast (thirteenth century) and Gregory of Sinai (d. 1346) wrote influential treatises combining the Jesus Prayer with specific breathing techniques to encourage the descent of intellect into the heart. Gregory, particularly, allegorized the prayer method as both a rediscovery of the grace of baptism and as a celebration of a triadic liturgy wherein the practitioner "offers up the Lamb of God upon the altar of the soul and partakes of him in communion" (*On Commandments and Doctrines* 43, 112; see Ware). When Barlaam of Calabria criticized the hesychasts for superstition and materialism, Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) emerged as the most articulate defender of the hesychast tradition.

At the heart of Barlaam's criticism was an insistence on the utter transcendence of God (perhaps a radical interpretation of Dionysian apophasticism), which rendered an earthly experience of God to be an impossibility. Palamas defended hesychast practice in two important ways. First, he differentiated between the essence of God and the energies of God, agreeing with Barlaam that God could not be known in his essence but insisting, against Barlaam, that he could be experienced through his uncreated energies (*Triads* 3.2.7). Second, Palamas rigorously defended the possibility of divine/human communion, insisting that the Christian can experience the energies of God in both soul and body. Relying heavily on Maximus the Confessor, Palamas noted that the incarnation had made possible the sanctification of the body, and he insisted upon the integration and unity of body and soul. To deny the possibility of divine/human communion, Gregory argued, was to deny both the incarnation and the power of God to create good things (*Triads* 1.3.37). Though the controversy was long-lasting and became a sub-story of a bitter civil war between rival claimants to the Byzantine throne, Palamas and the hesychasts were victorious at three Constantinopolitan synods (1341, 1347, and 1351).[13]

Like Nazianzen, Maximus, and Symeon before him, Palamas insisted on the importance of the ascetic purification as a component in divine/human communion. A superficial reading of any of these authors might lead to false conclusion that asceticism was intended to weaken the body or to subvert the body to the soul. One might also falsely presume that deification was something that belonged exclusively to the monastic community. A more careful assessment shows that the defining characteristic of Byzantine asceticism, something available to all Christians, was that the goal of ascetic purification was not to abuse the body but to return the body to its intended purpose, made good by God, for communion with God.

Rethinking Lossky's East/West Opposition

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented encounter between eastern and western theologians, due in large part to the establishment of an émigré community of Russian exiles in Paris in the 1920s. Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), an émigré himself, trained at the Sorbonne under the direction of the famous Roman Catholic historian of medieval philosophy Étienne Gilson. Lossky is perhaps best remembered for his *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, originally published in French in

1944 (an English translation appeared in 1976). Employing the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius as his focal point, Lossky offered an immensely influential appraisal of Orthodox theology that, unlike western Christianity, does not divorce theological investigation from personal mystical experience. The culmination of Orthodox theology, for Lossky, is to be found in the experience of Divine Light of *theosis*, which can only be properly understood by employing the Palamite essence/energy distinction.

What is perhaps most interesting about the volume is the extent to which it was written (both directly and indirectly) with Lossky's Roman Catholic colleagues in mind, especially the ecumenical and patristic-minded members of the *nouvelle théologie*. Engaging Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Jean Daniélou, Lossky both rejects what he perceives to be mischaracterizations of eastern theology in Catholic appraisals and highlights Orthodoxy's distinctive characteristics. Most notably, Lossky insists upon the essence/energy distinction as the key dogmatic principle that defines Orthodox theology and, therein, explains the possibility of divine/human communion (*theosis*). The west, having forsaken apophatic theology and having embraced pre-Christian Greek philosophy too uncritically (primarily through scholasticism) has, in Lossky's rendering, driven a wedge between theological investigation and personal experience of the divine. The implication is that the west has abandoned the authentic Christian vision of divine/human communion.

In addition to Dionysius, Lossky repeatedly refers to Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas. He is especially keen to defend the antiquity of the essence/energy distinction, arguing that it is rooted in the Dionysian corpus. This move is not surprising given that the Palamite distinction was often critiqued by Roman Catholic neo-Thomists in the twentieth century (an opponent of both Lossky and the *nouvelle théologie*). While Lossky correctly identifies important Patristic precedents concerning the divine energies, one might argue that he misled his western audience into thinking that the eastern Christian tradition had always employed the essence/energy distinction in its mystical theology and that it had always been a formal marker of Orthodox dogmatic identity.

Lossky's emphasis on the essence/energy distinction is significant for two reasons. First, it de-historicizes the hesychast contribution to Orthodox theology and the extent to which its practitioners were seeking an acceptable vocabulary to explain the mystical encounter with the Divine Light. Second, it ushered in an unprecedented movement among modern Orthodox theologians, championed by John Romanides and Christos Yannaras especially, to link Orthodox self-identity to the essence/energy distinction. Romanides, for example, took Lossky's criticism of the scholastics and traced their errors to Augustine, who had somehow managed to contaminate all subsequent western theology (see Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou 2008). What is perhaps most troubling about this tendency among Lossky's readers is that it implies it is a distorted apophaticism of identity in that it isolates and exonerates the crowning achievement of Orthodox theology to be the single element that is most absent in western theology. In other words, it defines what Orthodoxy is by naming that which the west is not. Despite this rather unfortunate trajectory in some Orthodox interpretations, Lossky is to be credited with the remarkable renewal of interest in Byzantine mysticism that so dominates contemporary study of Byzantine and Orthodox theology.

Notes

1   Eastern Orthodox theology, of course, continues to emphasize and explore the mystical qualities of divine/human communion. For an excellent analysis of the diversity of contemporary Orthodox reflection on that theme, see Papanikolaou.

2   Rorem distinguishes Dionysian apophaticism from Nyssa's by arguing that the formers is a "complete apophaticism," wherein the negations are not simply negations but actually represent a reverse affirmation of claim about God. Thus, for Rorem (2008: 455), Nyssa's Moses is ever ascending, chasing the divine as it were; but Dionysius' Moses does attain union with God, a completion, so to speak, of the negative ascent.

3   I am deeply indebted to Paul Blowers for his assistance in preparing the section on Maximus the Confessor.

4   His *Ad Thelassium* answers questions about Scriptural texts, whereas his *Ambigua* offer interpretive clarifications of the work of Gregory Nazianzen.

5   Whereas Dionysius argues that God can never be known, Maximus simultaneously affirms this but then interprets the Gospel of John to speak of the incarnation as the revelation of God's being, made known to us (Rorem 1998: 323–324).

6   The first set of *Ambigua* (nos 6–71) show Maximus' great affinity for Nazianzen and his desire to prevent the Cappadocian from being used as a proof-text by contemporary Origenists. See Blowers 2003: 22.

7   For an English translation of the text, see Berthold (183–225).

8   In a paradox typical of Maximus' thought, the mystery of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection enables *theosis* but, at the same time, the experience of *theosis* is necessary to comprehend the mystery of the birth, death, and resurrection. See his *Mystagogy*, 5.

9   Concerning the idea of deification as a transforming experience, see *Ambiguum* 20 and *Mystagogy* 5.

10 Although many scholars interpreted the move to Mamas as a punishment, John McGuckin has convincingly argued that it was a promotion.

11 Symeon's *vita* was composed by one of his disciples, Niketas Stethatos, roughly thirty years after the saint's death. An edition was prepared by Hauserr and Horn.

12 Symeon's letter (Turner), *On those who have the Power to Bind or Remit Sins*, is instructive.

13 Hundreds of years later, Dositheos II of Jerusalem (1641–1707) would employ the essence/energy distinction as a defining characteristic of Orthodox theology over and against Roman Catholics who were actively proselytizing in Orthodox communities in the Levant. See Russell, "From the *Shield of Orthodoxy*." Following the lead of Vladimir Lossky, the same essence/energy distinction become the most frequent marker of Orthodox doctrinal self-identity vis-à-vis alien western theologies in the twentieth century.

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Francis, Clare, and Bonaventure

Kevin L. Hughes

The early Franciscan community embodied a particularly intense recognition of a form of the *vita apostolica*, the apostolic life, characterized by a radical commitment to poverty, a focus upon the "life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" lived out in a kind of performative, literal imitation, and, for the men, an itinerant life moving between evangelical preaching in the towns of Umbria and a contemplative life in the wilderness hermitages, while for the women, an enclosed life in the community at San Damiano. As Bernard McGinn has noted, there is little in the writings of Francis (1182–1226) and Clare (1194–1253) themselves that would qualify as "mystical writing," and yet their movement proved to be one of the most fruitful vineyards for the later medieval mystical tradition, finding its classic theoretical articulation in the writings of St. Bonaventure (1217–1274). Rather than wringing my hands over the question of whether Francis or Clare were or were not "mystics," I hope to use Charles Taylor's notion of a "social imaginary" to shed light on the relationship between these early communities' "form of life" (*forma vitae*) and the later theoretical explications in the mystical writings of Saint Bonaventure. In short, the early Franciscan community constituted a "mystical social imaginary" in and through which "consciousness of God's presence in a deeper and more immediate way" (McGinn 1998: xi) was rendered thinkable in new ways, and the theology of St. Bonaventure integrates these new insights into the broader western Christian mystical theological traditions.

A Mystical Social Imaginary

Were Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi mystics? It is hard to dispute the fact that the spiritual traditions stemming from Francis and Clare and their companions were among the most fruitful in the Middle Ages. And yet, to ask the question so flat-footedly is to create a host of problems. What makes a mystic? Scholarship since the 1980s has

tended to move away from an experiential, universal definition of "mysticism" toward considering mysticism as a particular form of writing or teaching within a distinctive religious tradition. This recent consensus in scholarship is distilled in the heuristic definition of McGinn's history of western Christian mysticism, *The Presence of God*: "The mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God" (1992: xvii). At the limits of this trend, some scholars will claim that any writing that does not contain, formally, this pedagogical model of "preparation for, consciousness of, and reaction to" the presence of God cannot be properly named "mystical"; indeed, McGinn concedes that "it is difficult to claim that [Francis of Assisi's] writings can, in general, be called mystical literature" (1998: 51). This view, as such, leaves us in a bit of a muddle – Francis of Assisi is not a part of the tradition of Christian mysticism, but he is the source of inspiration for so much of it in the later Middle Ages.

McGinn, however, does not leave it there; he later demonstrates a more expansive scope for mysticism, one that surely includes Francis and Clare: "Yet if Christian mysticism is grounded in the entire faith of the believer, then any expression of [that faith] . . . can be said to have an implied mystical element, especially if it serves as the foundation for a more explicit mystical theory and practice" (1998: 51). This is the most fruitful angle from which to approach the early Franciscan tradition, especially its founding sources, as generative of a tradition or field of mystical belief, practice, literature, and theory. But is it enough to call this "an implied mystical element"?

To help make sense of that generative field of mystical belief and practice, I want to use philosopher Charles Taylor's heuristic tool, the "social imaginary." I will argue that Francis and Clare and their companions together constitute a distinctive "social imaginary," a social and communal context in which fundamental dimensions of the world and experience are rendered "thinkable" in a holistic way. What Charles Taylor has used for whole generations or epochs, I am using at a smaller scale to name dimensions of discourse and imagination that were characteristic of early Franciscan culture. Taylor defines the "social imaginary" as "the ways in which [a community of people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations" (23). The social imaginary is thus broader than a social theory, inasmuch as it can incorporate both consciously held perspectives and unconscious or semi-conscious dimensions of practice, life, and meaning that, together, constitute what counts as imaginable.

> We can see how the understanding of what we're doing right now (without which we couldn't be doing this action) makes the sense it does because of our grasp on the wider predicament: how we continuously stand or have stood in relation to others and to power. This, in turn, opens out wider perspectives on where we stand in space and time . . . in the narrative of our becoming. (Taylor 27)

With this as a guide, we may begin to sketch the outlines of a Franciscan "social imaginary" that begins with "lowliness." At the core of the early community's sense of itself

was a deep humility that began with one's sense of social class, but penetrated down to a metaphysical sense of radical contingency. In tandem with this primordial, translatable sense of humility came a way of knowing and naming God, paradoxically, as "Most High" and yet present in and to lowliness. For Francis, Clare, and their early companions, poverty, humility, and obedience became privileged points of access to the presence of God. The life of the community itself became the mystical path for the early followers of Francis and Clare.

Thinking of the early Franciscan community as participants in a mystical social imaginary thus shifts our focus from always-fraught questions of personal religious experience and onto matters of discourse and practice. It also gives space to the deeply social nature of much of our material on the early Franciscans. If we are to make any use of the early sources beyond the writings themselves, we cannot help but note that religious insights of various kinds were more performed than formulated between the friars and poor sisters.

This approach extends the pioneering work of Ewert Cousins, who described Francis's "mysticism of the historical event" (64) as manifesting God's presence in and through a literal performative imitation and re-presentation of the life of Christ, in a way that can incorporate a social and more comprehensive account of early Franciscan life and thought, to include not only their imitation of the life of Jesus but also their practice of mutual obedience, of radical poverty, of prayer and recollection, etc. The aggregate whole of these habits and practices together offer the "form of life" to which Francis, Clare, and their companions aspired, a social imaginary that rendered the "presence of God" mystically enfolded within every thought, word, and deed, accessible in its ineffability.

This early Franciscan social imaginary rendered God's presence accessible in particular ways: in the beauty and harmony of the created order, in the anamnesis of the historical events of Jesus' life, in the embrace of radical poverty, humility, and simplicity, in the bonds of fellowship, obedience, and hospitality. Such a comprehensive scope allows us to consult not only the writings of the founders themselves, but also the *legenda* and hagiographical sources, since we are less interested in the light they shed on the religious experience of "the historical Francis" than we are in the way they illuminate and illustrate the milieu of the early Franciscan community.[1]

Francis of Assisi and the Early Companions

The story of Francis of Assisi is well known: A young, playful son of the merchant class underwent a significant conversion, something which he described as a call "to do penance." At the heart of his conversion was a call to show mercy to the lepers in his community, which made them no longer "bitter" for him to behold, but "sweet" (Armstrong 1999: 124) This very gesture of mercy, he says, gave "sweetness of body and soul" and led him to "leave the world." The charismatic young Francis soon attracted the attention of a band of companions. This early community gave up all possessions, prayed together and worked for their food and/or begged for alms. Using the little chapel of St. Mary at the Portiuncula as a home base, the brothers wandered the Umbrian

countryside, working, praying, exhorting each other in holiness, and begging for alms. It is in this communal context of discipleship that we can see a distinctive social imaginary taking shape.

The pillars upon which this "way of seeing" was built were, in the first place, a belief that the community could and should follow the life prescribed by the Gospel – especially the Sermon on the Mount – as literally as they possibly could. This mimetic discipleship is related intimately to a second dimension, the cultivation of the virtues of obedience and humility through dramatic gestures of performative self-abasement, which in and of themselves led to experiences of "spiritual consolation." This performative self-abasement is itself the deep structure of the early community's commitment to radical evangelical poverty, the most distinctively Franciscan practice that would cause so much controversy in the years that followed. All of these factors contributed to a third dimension of the mystical social imaginary, and the one perhaps most apparently "mystical," the sense of fraternal solidarity with all creatures precisely as vessels or conduits of divine life and divine praise, what I will call a doxological solidarity with the created order. These three features are less distinct qualities than three facets of an emerging and shared intuition or awareness of the immediate presence of God.

Mimetic discipleship

Just as Jesus wandered from town to town with his disciples, so, too, did Francis and his early followers. Francis in his Testament, says, "after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel" (Armstrong 1999: 125). In his "Earlier Rule," Francis wrote, "the rule and life of these brothers is this, namely, 'to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own,' and to follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Armstrong 1999: 63–64). Legendary events such as Francis's supposed "casting" of a live Nativity pageant in Greccio at Christmastime in 1223 (Armstrong 1999: 254) and his sending of his disciples in groups of two bear witness to this desire to imitate Christ in as literal a fashion as possible.

Performative self–abasement

Within this literal performative space, the early community sought opportunities to practice obedience and humility, even to the point of humiliation and self-abasement. Thomas of Celano, Francis's early hagiographer, paints a vivid portrait:

> They were truly lesser, who, by being subject to all, always sought the position of contempt, performing duties which they foresaw would be the occasion of some affront . . . What great flame of charity burned in the new disciples of Christ! What great love of devout company flourished in them! When they all gathered somewhere or met each other on the road (which frequently happened), in that place a shoot of spiritual love sprang up, scattering over all love the seeds of real delight. (Armstrong 1999: 217)

Thomas's point is clear – the experience of abasement and contempt were connected intimately with the experience of intimate connection between the brothers in the early community, and this intimate connection became an occasion for "spiritual love" to spring up, giving the seeds of "real delight."

Francis himself makes this point in one of the "dictated writings," "On True and Perfect Joy." In this vignette, Francis asks his companion Brother Leo to "Write . . . what true joy is." He rehearses several scenarios of tremendous success for the order – all the Masters in Paris and the kings of France and England become Franciscan; the brothers successfully convert all non-believers to the Gospel; Francis himself becomes a great healer and wonder-worker – only to say that none of these would be an occasion for true joy. Instead, true joy would come if Francis were to return from a long winter journey and arrive late at night at the Portiuncula, cold, tired, and dirty from the road. When he knocks, the brothers fail to recognize him, and, no matter how much he pleads, they turn him away into the night. "I tell you this," says Francis, "If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this" (Armstrong 1999: 166–167). "True and Perfect Joy" is found paradoxically in abasement.

In the early Franciscan lexicon, these words – spiritual love, real delight, true joy – serve as pointers to the consciousness of the immediate presence of God, brought to conscious awareness in and through these practices of prayer, service, obedience, and humiliation. The "Life of Brother Juniper" accentuates this connection between humiliation and holiness in the figure of Juniper, a "holy fool." Juniper is a companion of Francis who repeatedly and deliberately humiliates himself, stripping naked, playing children's games, all in the desire to humiliate himself in the eyes of others, in this way to become completely "minor," lesser, in their estimation. In a similar vein, the later vernacular collection, *The Fioretti*, relates the story of a role-playing game played by Francis and Leo, where Francis commands Leo under holy obedience to tell Francis that he deserves the fires of hell and condemnation, so that Francis is instructed in humility. Miraculously, Leo is unable to comply; when he tries, only words of praise and commendation come out of his mouth. In one last desperate attempt, Francis cries out "Oh wicked little brother Francis, do you think God will have mercy on you." Again, miraculously, Leo can only say "Yes, Father, God will have mercy on you. Besides, you will receive a great grace from God for your salvation . . . because 'whoever humbles himself shall be exalted,' and I cannot say anything else because God is speaking through my mouth." The story ends telling us that "they stayed up until dawn in this humble contest, with many tears and great spiritual consolations" (Brown 60–61).

These stories paint in vivid colors the Franciscan intuition that true and perfect joy is found in self-abasement, in becoming "lesser" in any and every way. Francis's intention that his community be called "Friars Minor" – literally, "lesser brothers" (Armstrong 1999: 68) – bears witness to a desire both to be in solidarity with the Umbrian poor, the *minores*, and to be, simply, "lesser" than any they encounter. In his own summary, Francis tells us that the early brothers "were simple and subject to all" (Armstrong 1999: 125). Indeed, the distinctively Franciscan commitment to radical evangelical poverty is but one aspect of this refusal of status or "priority" in any form. To

refuse money, to beg for one's sustenance, is to place one simply at another's mercy, to be subject to another completely, to be "lesser."

Doxological solidarity with the created order

The early community's experience of what we might call "active" consolations was complemented by the consolations of prayer. The rhythm of life established by Francis and his companions moved seamlessly between work and prayer, between the town and the countryside, between action and contemplation. Francis was explicit in his rule about both the activities of work, begging alms, and preaching and the retreat into the life of prayer. He wrote his "Rule for Hermitages" to establish a regular structure for each of the friars to be left in the solitude of prayer, with one or two brothers assigned as "mother" or "Martha" to tend to the solitary "son/Mary" (Armstrong 1999: 62).

The early Franciscans prayed regularly in common, as well. It is striking how much of what we possess of Francis's own writings are liturgical or hymn-texts of one sort or another, from the longer Office of the Passion to the variety of shorter divine praises, and, most poignantly, the "Canticle of Brother Sun"/"Canticle of the Creatures." Francis's Earlier Rule treats prayer and the divine office in the third chapter, well before addressing the "active" practices of poverty, alms, work, or preaching. Several of Francis's extant writings consist entirely of scriptural verses of praise, taken from throughout the Bible, arranged to compose hymns of praise. Drawing especially upon the cosmological and nature-centered hymns of Daniel 3, the Psalms, and the Apocalypse, these compilations juxtapose "creatures," "rivers," and "birds of heaven," with "all you who fear the Lord," and "all you children," establishing through this apparently willy-nilly arrangement a close filiation of all creatures, animate and inanimate, in the praise of God.

Such doxological solidarity is nowhere more evident than in Francis's famous poetic composition, the "Canticle of the Sun." Composed near the end of his life, when he was ill and nearly blind, dwelling in a small, dark shack attached to the Portiuncula, Francis's Canticle is the richest expression of Francis's mystical insight. An early example of Italian vernacular poetry, the Canticle exploits the ambiguity of the preposition "per" to weave a complex tapestry of divine immanence and transcendence. It begins by establishing God's sovereignty over all of creation, such that "no human is worthy to mention your name" (Armstrong 1999: 113). Having thus established God's apophatic unnameability, the Canticle then proceeds to name the ways in which God is made manifest through (per) and praised by (per) all creatures, each in their particular qualities: "Brother Sun" manifests and praises God because he is "beautiful and radiant with great splendor"; "Sister Moon and the stars" do likewise because they are "clear and precious and beautiful." And so on for Wind, Water, Fire, and Earth. Among humans, God is manifest and praised in those who "give pardon for Your love." Even "our Sister Bodily Death" manifests and praises God in her very inescapability (113). Taken together, the verses of the Canticle paint a portrait of the created order crackling with the energy of praise and divine life. Creation is the theophany of the Unseen and

Unnameable Mystery of God, the immanence made possible by the transcendence of the God whose name no human is worthy to mention.

Clare of Assisi and Her Community

Recent scholarship has begun to unfold a depth and spiritual insight in the work and life of Clare of Assisi (1195–1253). In humility, Clare often called herself *la pianticella*, the "little plant" of Francis, and for many years Franciscan scholarship took her at her word, viewing Clare and her community as a branch or offshoot of the main Franciscan movement. Yet the work of recent scholars has painted a different picture, of a community of women committed to following a rigorous life of poverty in the model of Francis albeit in radically different circumstances from those of Francis himself.

Clare certainly began her religious life in close connection to Francis. A young woman from a wealthy Assisi family, Clare was drawn to the holiness of Francis and his companions. Francis recognized her thirst for holiness and conspired to help her escape from her family and become the first female member of the early community. Her sister Agnes soon followed, and within a brief time, there was a small community of female disciples of Francis. It is unclear how they lived in those early days of their community; the papal legate Jacques de Vitry writes of "men and women" living in poverty in the Italian countryside, working in town by day and retreating into houses on the edges of town by night. If this describes the Franciscans, it may be that Clare and her female companions at first lived a form of life very much like that of Francis and his brothers. In short order, however, Clare and her community were living a more traditional women's religious life, first as residents in a larger monastery, and then in the convent of San Damiano in Assisi, which they established themselves.

There they became the focus of a reform movement for women religious sponsored by Cardinal Hugolino dei Conti de Segni, later named Pope Gregory IX (1227–1241). Wanting to unite the various experiments in women's religious life welling up in Tuscany and Lombardy in one great order, Hugolino chose Clare's community at San Damiano as the motherhouse of a new Order of Saint Damian. He imposed on this order a religious rule adapted from the Rule of Benedict. What this rule lacked, however, was what Clare and her sisters at San Damiano thought most essential – a deep commitment to the radical apostolic poverty of Francis.

In fact, the poverty Clare sought was, in a way, more radical than Francis's own. If Francis and his companions worked or begged for food, Clare and the community of San Damiano, as an enclosed community, were entirely dependent upon alms coming to them freely, and thus even more vulnerable and insecure. The Benedictine model, which allowed communal property, seemed to promise greater stability and material security. In this matter, Clare was unbending; through her diligence, she obtained first a dispensation for her own house to live in poverty as she desired (1228), and, later, just before she died, approval of her own form of life (1253). It is in the integration of this radical vision of poverty into the enclosed, contemplative life that Clare and her companions make an important contribution to our understanding of Christian mysti-

cism, making explicit the kind of interior poverty that is coincident with the exterior poverty embraced by these early Franciscan communities.

This interior poverty constellates in Clare's few writings around two central and interwoven images – Christ as Spouse, and Christ as Mirror. These two images are not original to Clare; to the contrary, they are two classic tropes of mystical literature, rooted in the Song of Songs (see Chapter 2, this volume), in the letters of Paul, and the writings of the early Fathers, but Clare integrates a distinctively Franciscan perspective with the broader tradition of Christian mystical writing. Observing a traditional cloistered form of the contemplative life, yet with their particular commitment to Franciscan poverty, Clare and her community began to forge a new mystical vocabulary that would bear fruit in later Franciscan authors.

Clare's spiritual teaching emerges most clearly in her correspondence with Agnes of Prague. Agnes, the daughter of the king of Bohemia, had heard stories of Francis and Clare, and she felt called to Clare's form of life. In four letters that span nearly twenty years, Clare communicates to her distant disciple the central dimensions of her spiritual vision. In her first letter, Clare praises Agnes for turning away from the wealth available to her through a noble marriage and choosing instead a "life of holy poverty and bodily want" (Armstrong 2006: 43–44). In this, Agnes has chosen "a spouse of more noble stock . . . the Lord Jesus Christ" (44). As "spouse and mother and sister of my Lord Jesus Christ," Agnes is "beautifully adorned with the banners of an undefiled virginity and a most holy poverty," in the "holy service of the Poor Crucified undertaken with a passionate desire" (45). Already one can see Clare's ease with traditional spousal imagery of union, drawn from the Song of Songs, seamlessly interwoven with her vision of poverty. In Clare, we see more explicitly what lies implicit in Francis – namely, that poverty and humility are Christological in shape. The embrace of poverty is not simply a practice in rigorous self-denial but a form of union with "the Poor Crucified." "O God-centered [*pia*] poverty," as Clare extols the virtue, "whom the Lord Jesus Christ . . . came down to embrace before all else" (45). For Clare, to embrace holy poverty is to find oneself embraced by Christ in the very movement of God into flesh. If the Incarnation is itself God's embrace of poverty, then to be poor is to be in union with God in this most fundamental mystery.

In Clare's second and third letters, she amplifies this spousal theme and unites it with the traditional contemplative trope of the "mirror," proposing a contemplative path that will bring Agnes into a deeper awareness of her union with Christ. "But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ. Look upon him who became contemptible for you . . . Most noble queen, *gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate* your Spouse" (Armstrong 2006: 49). This movement from "gazing" to "considering" to "contemplating" to "desiring," a pattern repeated at least twice more in the letters, articulates a movement of interior imitation. If for Francis the literal, performative re-presentation of the itinerant life of Christ and the disciples was a path of "spiritual joy," for Clare, to "follow in the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ" (50) includes this practice of "placing your mind before the mirror of eternity," moving inward from the gaze, through consideration and contemplation, to "tasting the hidden sweetness that, from the beginning, God Himself has reserved for his lovers" (51).

Clare's most mature treatment of the mirror is found in her fourth letter to Agnes, nearly twenty years after the first. She counsels Agnes to "gaze upon that mirror each day . . . that you may adorn yourself completely, within and without . . . as is becoming the daughter and dearest bride of the Most High King." "Indeed," she continues, "in that mirror, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity shine forth." She then explores the mirror metaphor through the literary device of the blazon, moving from outside to inside, integrating this description with her contemplative itinerary:

> *look upon* the border of this mirror, that is the poverty of him who was placed in a manger . . . Then *reflect upon*, at the surface of this mirror, the holy humility, at least the blessed poverty, the untold labors and punishments that He endured for the redemption of the human race. Finally, *contemplate*, in the depth of this same mirror, the ineffable charity that he chose to suffer on the tree of the Cross . . . O Queen of our Heavenly King, may you therefore be *inflamed* ever more strongly with the fire of love! (Armstrong 2006: 56)

For Clare, the "mirror of Christ" reflects the entire mission of the Incarnate Word, from His first movement into the poverty of flesh to his life among the poor to his death on the Cross. From this mirror shines nothing so clearly as the radical poverty of God in complete self-gift, a virtue echoed and answered in the poverty Francis discovered wandering the roads of Umbria, and in the poverty that Clare spent her life defending for her sisters. Clare is clear that, for her, it is in the contemplative appropriation of the poverty of Christ that the virgin spouse comes to cry out in the passion of the bridal chamber, "Draw me after you, let us run in the fragrance of your perfumes (Sg 1.3), O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until you bring me into the wine-cellar (Sg 2.4), until your left hand is under my head and your right hand will embrace me happily (Sg 2.6). You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of your mouth!" (Sg 1.1).

Poverty becomes for Clare the window through which she can perceive the classical mystical language of erotic union. Her role in the early Franciscan mystical tradition brings classical contemplative tropes into intimate union with Francis's mimetic discipleship and performative humility. Clare begins to weave the fresh perspective of the Franciscan "mystical social imaginary" into the rich tapestry of Christian mystical literature. In this, Clare may be said to have found a disciple in Bonaventure, perhaps the most creative, controversial, and influential integrating figure in the early Franciscan movement.

Bonaventure's Franciscan Mystical Theology

The spiritual legacy of Francis of Assisi became a disputed question even before Francis himself died. What began as a small, improvisational way of life for Francis and a few friends had become by 1217 a sprawling intercontinental religious order with thousands of friars throughout eleven provinces, creating an administrative demand that, within a few years, became too much for Francis himself to manage. He resigned as Minister General in 1221 and returned to the simplicity of his life as a friar. As their numbers increased, the pastoral and apostolic demands upon the friars grew; with

greater demands came greater need for education and formation. It is no surprise, then, that Franciscans (with their fellow mendicants, the Dominicans) arrived in 1221 at the University of Paris, the center of European education and formation for young clergy. But the poverty and simplicity of Francis's original vision sat rather uneasily with the more settled life of the university, and tensions began to build. After the death of Francis in 1226, factions wrestled for leverage over his legacy. Often these leveraging tools took the shape of narrative accounts of the life of Francis and the early community, with particular stories built into an overall polemical message for or against study, for example, or with greater or less ascetical rigor. At the General Chapter convened in 1260 at Narbonne, Bonaventure, Minister General since 1257, received a request from his brothers to write a definitive life, settling disputes between proponents of different versions of the life of Francis.

Bonaventure himself had come to the Franciscans as a student, John of Fidanza, at the University of Paris. Young John had studied with Alexander of Hales, a master who took the habit late in life in 1236, and with Alexander's successor and fellow friar John of La Rochelle. He joined the friars in 1243, taking "Bonaventure" as his religious name. Bonaventure was established as a Master of Theology in 1254, and found himself elected Minister General of the order only three years later. Bonaventure was elected as a unifying figure in the wake of controversy, because, while his entire life as a Franciscan had been in studies at Paris, his reputation for zeal and holiness had spread throughout the order. His first message to the order as Minister General bore witness to his zealous commitment to the disciplines of poverty and simplicity, but his bookish past still raised concern among some factions. The task, then, of writing the authoritative life of Francis must have been delicate, but it was just one instance of the intellectual labor Bonaventure set for himself throughout his writing: to bring the very best insights of the Christian theological tradition to bear upon the life and witness of Francis and the community.

Such a labor was bound to cause some consternation among some of the friars. Indeed, when Bonaventure was researching his life of Francis, he visited Brother Giles, one of Francis's original companions. According to the legend, Giles asked Bonaventure, "Can a simple person love God as much as a learned one?" To this, Bonaventure responded with a traditional humility trope of the School of Paris: "An old woman can do so even more than a master of theology." Hearing this, Giles "arose in fervor of spirit and went into the garden near the part which looked toward the city and cried out, 'Poor little old woman, simple and unlearned, love the Lord God and you will be greater than Brother Bonaventure!' (Seton 19). This playful but pointed reminder from the elder Franciscan to the scholastic Minister General was one Bonaventure took to heart. He is careful to point out in his life of Francis that Giles, himself simplex et ignota (simple and unlearned), was "raised to the height of exalted contemplation." "[He] was so often rapt into God in ecstasy, as I myself have observed as an eyewitness, that he seemed to live among people more like an angel than a human being" (Armstrong 2000: 544).

For Bonaventure, the relationship between his scholastic learning and the simple holiness of Francis and Giles entailed no contradiction. On the contrary, he believed it demonstrated the hand of Providence among the friars. In a letter he wrote to an

anonymous master of theology explaining his understanding of the Franciscans' particular charism, Bonaventure explained,

> For I confess before God that what made me love St. Francis's way of life so much was that it is exactly like the origin and the perfection of the Church itself, which began first with simple fishermen and afterwards developed to include the most illustrious and learned doctors. You find the same thing in the Order of St. Francis; in this way God reveals that it did not come about through human calculations but through Christ. (Monti 113).

Just as the fathers of the church had come after the apostles and used the power of their educated minds to develop and define what was implicit in the preaching of the simple fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John, so, too, the "illustrious and learned doctors" among the friars had come after Francis to develop what was implicit in his own way of life. This brief passage can serve as a charter for Bonaventure's own mystical reflection on Francis of Assisi. He believed it his responsibility as a master of theology to bring the very keenest insights of the mystical theological tradition, of Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Gallus, and Bernard of Clairvaux (among others), to bear upon the simple witness of holiness found in Francis.

Bonaventure's mystical theology finds its center in Francis even as it spans the wider tradition.[2] Drinking deeply from the pool of the Christian Neoplatonic tradition of Pseudo-Denys and Thomas Gallus, Bonaventure's theological vision explores the contours of the *exitus* (emanation) and *reditus* (return) of divine life, of emanation, exemplarity, and consummation (see Chapters 4, 11, 12, and 17, this volume). His Trinitarian theology moves in dynamic self-gift from the "fontal fullness" (*fontalis plenitudo*) of the Father through the mediating center and exemplar of the Word, both given and giver, on to the consummating "gift," the Holy Spirit. The Son, the Word at the Center of divine life, is both the "expressed Word," the full expression or image of the Father in the Son, and the "expressive Word," the divine Exemplar of all created being. The Incarnation is the self-emptying expression of Divine Love, of the "voluntary poverty" of God in "taking the form of a slave" and "becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7–8; cf. Armstrong 2000: 731, 737). This Christocentric theological vision finds its complement in a mystical theology centered on Francis, for it is in Francis that we find what human union with God in Christ looks like.

For Bonaventure, Francis's life is a path of growing conformity to the Crucified Christ. This process of conversion and conformation culminates in Francis's experience in prayer on Mount La Verna, where he had a vision of Christ within a six-winged seraph and received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ miraculously imprinted on his hands, feet, and side.

> [T]his miracle was made necessary because of Saint Francis's eminent holiness which found expression in his most fervent love of the Crucified Lord . . . Hugh of St. Victor tells us: "Such is the power of love, that it transforms the lover into the Beloved." Love of the Crucified Lord was supremely and gloriously aflame in his heart, and so the Crucified himself, in the form of the Seraph . . . appeared before his saintly eyes and imprinted the sacred stigmata on his body. (Armstrong 2000: 515)

Bonaventure describes this miraculous event as the final movement in a life already totally conformed to Christ. Francis thus becomes a window into Christ, and Christ himself is the image of the invisible God. Through pondering the image of Francis stigmatized, we see Christ, and therefore we see God. Francis is both the example of perfect human union with God and is himself an icon of God's own activity. He was so before the stigmata; this latter event only makes tangible what was already present in the very shape of Francis's life.

The stigmata of Francis lie at the heart of Bonaventure's most important work in mystical literature, the *Mind's Journey into God* (1259). He tells us in his prologue that he made a retreat to Mt La Verna "there to satisfy the yearning of my heart for peace." As he remembered Francis's vision of the Seraph in that spot, "it suddenly seemed to me that this vision suggested the uplifting of Saint Francs in contemplation and that it pointed out the way by which that state of contemplation can be reached" (Boehner 31). The six-winged seraph represents the "six uplifting illuminations by which the soul is disposed . . . to pass over to peace through the ecstatic transports of Christian wisdom" (33). What follows in seven brief chapters is a dense but lyrical tapestry of medieval mystical theology, integrating scholastic theology, Dionysian apophaticism, Cistercian and Victorine affective mysticism, and Augustinian interiority, with much more besides.

The theoretical infrastructure of the *Mind's Journey* is deceptively simple. For Bonaventure, the "six uplifting illuminations" represented by the wings of the seraph are modes of human knowing by which we may come to recognize the immanent presence of God. Moving from lower to higher, from outer to inner, the human person comes to recognize God in all things, within the soul, and then above the soul.

> The universe is a ladder for ascending into God. Some created things are vestiges, some images . . . In order to come to an investigation of the First Principle . . . we must pass through (*transire*) the vestige which is corporal, temporal, and outside us . . . we must enter into (*intrare*) our mind, which is the image of God, everlasting, spiritual, and within us . . . and we must go beyond (*transcendere*) to the eternal and most spiritual above us by gazing upon the first principle. (39)

Each level or act of knowing, *transire*, *intrare*, and *transcendere*, is divided into two sections. First, in *transire*, (passing through) the soul comes to know God through created vestiges by the power of sense, knowing God as the creator and source of all, as "Alpha," the beginning (Itin. I). Then the soul sees God in created vestiges as He is in them by essence, power, and presence, as "Omega," their proper end (41). When next the soul enters into itself (*intrare*), she recognizes God as Alpha through itself as image of God, with memory, intellect, and will (63). This is followed by the gracious restoration of the soul by grace, so that the soul can now perceive God as Omega in itself through faith, hope, and love (73). Thus restored to its proper likeness and "made hierarchical" (i.e., rightly ordered to God) the soul turns above (*transcendere*), knowing God with a super-rational *intelligentia*, first through the divine light, considering God as Alpha under the divine name Being (81) and then in the divine light as Omega under the divine name Good (89). At each stage, the soul (mind) moves from outer to inner and from beginning to end, creating a kind of conceptual upward spiral into contemplation.

This ascent through the ladder of creation into God leaves the soul not in the fullness of delight in the presence of God, but rather in suspended wonder, since contemplation of God under the names of Being and Good allows the mind to perceive God as "both first and last, eternal and most present, most simple and greatest or uncircumscribed" and to understand that in God "communicability coexists with personal propriety, consubstantiality with plurality, conformability with personality" (93). The inconceivable but undeniable truth of these coincident opposites suspends the faculty of understanding and disposes it for the last movement of the journey into union, *excessus mentis*, the ecstatic, suprarational, apophatic understanding of divine union.

To grasp the conceptual scheme of the *Mind's Journey*, as it integrates Augustinian interiority and Dionysian hierarchy, and interweaves scholastic illuminationist cognition theory with monastic love-mysticism, is only to begin to see the genius of the work. Bonaventure saturates this conceptual schema with the rich scriptural symbols and a deeply Franciscan sensibility. The "journey" of the mind in Bonaventure's hands becomes a scriptural "song of ascents" to the Temple of Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. In the Prologue, Bonaventure announces that he came to Mt. La Verna seeking the peace of Francis, who "like a citizen of that Jerusalem about which the Man of Peace, who was peaceable with those that hated peace, exhorts us concerning it: pray for the things that are to the peace of Jerusalem" (Boehner 31). The lower levels of natural understanding are "the three days' journey in the wilderness" spare even rhetorically, relatively free of scriptural ornamentation, leading the reader quickly into the richer fare of the later chapters.

The entry into the soul is then the passing through the "inner atrium" of the temple toward the "Holy of Holies, the place before the Tabernacle." As the soul turns above itself, Bonaventure brings the reader into the Holy of Holies. The cherubim arrayed on either side of the Mercy Seat are the two approaches to God, through the Exodus theophany, God's name as "Being" on the one side, and the Trinity, God's name as "Good" on the other. Then, with perhaps the most shocking juxtaposition of all, the Mercy Seat, the empty space that holds God's invisible presence, is for Bonaventure the all-too-visible image of Christ Crucified, the "image of the invisibl God" (Col. 1.15), upon which the cherubim gaze. Cataphatic symbol unites with apophatic ineffability; the very fragility and powerless humanity of Christ reveals God's radical transcendence.

As Denys Turner says, for Bonaventure "Christ is . . . our access to the unknowability of God, not so as ultimately to know it, but so as to be brought into participation with the *Deus absconditus* precisely as unknown" (23). In the Crucified, God remains unknown, but embraced in love:

> If you wish to know how these things may come about, ask grace and not learning; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not the diligence of reading; the Bridegroom, not the teacher; darkness, not clarity: not light, but the fire that completely inflames and bears one over into God in the anointings of ecstasy and the most ardent affections. God himself is this fire, and his furnace is in Jerusalem; and it is Christ who enkindles it in the white flame of his most burning passion. (Boehner 101)

The embrace of Christ is nothing less than a mystical death, the silencing of "all our cares, our desires, and our imaginings." "With Christ Crucified let us pass out of this world to the Father, so that, when the Father is shown to us, we may say with Philip, 'It is enough for us'" (Boehner 101). As Francis was united to Christ, in perfect contemplation, so, too, are we invited into the same union. Once again, Francis is both icon and exemplar of this "journey of the mind into God."

The beauty and complexity of the *Mind's Journey* accomplishes what only a virtuoso scholastic master could do, in the interweaving of so many strands of the theological tradition in so rich and condensed a treatise. But in another sense, the text can be seen as a commentary on Francis's Canticle of the Sun. Beginning from the theophanic dimensions of the natural world, where sun and moon and the rest of the world of sense bear witness to and praise God their Creator and Final Good, Bonaventure, like Francis, turns to human persons and then even to the figure of death to praise the glory of God, present in our midst. The text ends with the embrace of the Crucified that Francis embodies in his stigmata, and, Bonaventure says, "It is enough for us." In sum, Bonaventure has taken the deep simplicity of Francis and the early community's mystical social imaginary and expanded it into a fully developed mystical theology.

Franciscan Trajectories: Theophany, Poverty, and Annihilation

Francis's mystical insight was essentially practical: if one wanted to be conscious of the immediate presence of God, one should follow Christ as literally as one can. As Christ was poor, so you should be. As God in Christ humbled himself in the Incarnation and the Passion, so too should you humble yourself in his name. As Christ came in the midst of the poor and the weak, so, too, should you find Christ in the poor and the weak. As insights go, this was not novel; what distinguished Francis was the intensity and faithfulness with which he followed it. His faithfulness was generative, first of a small community of prayer and service, and then of a worldwide ecclesial movement, but its effects were felt in still, small ways, too, in the life of prayer. Clare's work enriched this insight, exploring the deeper, interior dimensions of poverty. In Bonaventure, we see the erudition of Paris joined to the insight of Assisi to unfold a fully Franciscan mystical theology.

In and through this early Franciscan social imaginary, Francis, Clare, and Bonaventure initiate new trajectories in mystical literature. Francis's sense of mission in imitation of Christ illustrates the manifest presence of God beyond the cloister and beyond the traditional monastic practices of *lectio* and spiritual exegesis. The relationship between Francis and Clare points to a fundamental feature of what McGinn has called the "new mysticism" of the thirteenth century (1998: xi): a dialogical, relational mode of theological exchange between men and women that would take on new life in the later Middle Ages. In Bonaventure we see a new kind of Christological apophaticism that harmonized later medieval popular devotion to the passion of Christ with the heights of Christian Neoplatonism. The most significant trajectory for the study of mysticism, perhaps, is the shared Franciscan insight into poverty as both a metaphysical sign of the gratuity and contingency of creation and a theological image of divine

self-emptying love, an insight that opened up possibilities within language and thought to reflect on the mystical theme of the soul's annihilation expressed in later figures such as Jacopone da Todi, Angela of Foligno, and Marguerite Porete (see Chapters 21, 22, and 25, this volume). All of this from Francis's initial vocation, to be "simple and subject to all" (Armstrong 1998: 125).

Notes

1   In an influential article, Octavian Schmucki has drawn out the mystical elements he finds within (and only within) Francis's own writings. There are benefits to this approach, but it still seems to presume that what we are most interested in is the religious experience of Francis himself. See Schmucki.

2   A thorough study of Bonaventure's mystical theology would have to include careful study of several other of Bonaventure's works, among them *The Threefold Way*, the *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, and the *Collations on the Six Days of Creation*.

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CHAPTER 20

The Nuns of Helfta

Anna Harrison

Endowed with extensive properties, populated by noble women, and part of a network of prominent religious institutions, the thirteenth-century Cistercian monastery of Helfta under the leadership of Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (c. 1232–1291) fostered intellectual inquiry, with the understanding that the knowledge acquired through the study of the liberal arts was a prerequisite for the full flourishing of devotion. It was during Abbess Gertrude's tenure that Helfta was home to three women renowned during their lifetime for their sharp intellect, robust religiosity, and spiritual acumen: Mechtild of Magdeburg (c. 1208–c. 1282) (see Chapters 3, 6, and 22, this volume), Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241–c. 1298/9), and Gertrude of Helfta (1256–c. 1301/2). Although some broad twentieth-century studies of medieval mysticism and general histories of western Christian spirituality did allot space to these women, they received scant consideration in Anglophone literature until the 1970s, when, invigorated by feminism and the increased attention to the history of women, English-language scholarship contributed to the efflorescence of interest in the writings associated with Gertrude and the two Mechtilds. These constitute one of our most valuable resources for late medieval mysticism and therefore merit further examination.

Late in her life, Mechtild of Magdeburg, the persecuted and celebrated beguine, retired to Helfta, where, with aid from the nuns, she composed a portion of her book, the *Flowing Light of the Divinity*. In it, Mechtild depicts herself as an instrument by which God communicates to humankind. Visions of heaven and hell figure in this work as do accounts of dialogues between Mechtild and God, all of which convey a sense of God's love and accessibility as well as of the sin that separates the soul from saving union with God. Through her person and her writing, Mechtild seems to have exerted a stimulus on two other surviving works produced at Helfta – the *Book of Special Grace*, associated with Mechtild of Hackeborn, and the *Herald of Divine Love*, associated with Gertrude of Helfta. Both are composite works, with structures similar to each other, and consisting largely in accounts of revelations and ecstasies, spiritual teachings, and

prayers. These works are testimonies to the exemplary devotion of Mechtild and Gertrude, as well as to the piety of cloister's female inhabitants considered collectively. Another work of Gertrude's, the *Spiritual Exercises*, is a series of prayers, chants, and litanies based largely on the liturgy.

Whereas Mechtild of Magdeburg composed the bulk of the *Flowing Light of the Divinity* before she arrived at the monastery, with the assistance of male advisors, and in the German vernacular, Gertrude and Mechtild composed in their books entirety at Helfta, with almost no discernable male involvement, in Latin. The *Herald* and *Book of Special Grace* are exceptional for their all-female collaborative composition and for what they can tell us about the religiosity of the Helfta household. For these reason, this essay will focus on the Latin-language visionary-mystical works associated with Gertrude and Mechtild of Hackeborn as well as on Gertrude's *Spiritual Exercises*.

Mechtild and Gertrude were little girls when they entered the convent. Mechtild's parents were patrons of the house and her older sister, Gertrude of Hackeborn, was abbess when Mechtild came to Helfta. The circumstances surrounding Gertrude's arrival are unknown. As adults, both were revered not only by the nuns of their monastery but also by clergy and laity for their role as intercessors and spiritual counselors. They were commended as interpreters of the religious life, which they embodied in their devoted observance of monastic rule and custom, their extravagant love of Christ, and their reverent obedience to his biddings. The *Herald* and *Book of Special Graces* celebrate Gertrude and Mechtild as visionaries and as mystics – or, better, visionary mystics – who frequently received revelations in which they tarried with Christ, Mary, and the saints, encountered suffering souls in purgatory, and were regularly snatched into ecstatic union with God.

Their visionary mysticism is Christocentric, describing a longing for union with Christ coupled with a commitment to both making good on obligations to him and bringing pleasure to him. Moreover, their mysticism aims to cultivate this longing and champion this commitment, confident that the monastic life is supremely suited to these purposes. The literature stresses the gratification Christ derives from the increase in the holiness of the nuns, who were convinced that sanctity could be best pursued in fellowship with the saints; they believed, furthermore, that they could increase the joy of the saints and were sure that Christ looked favorably on their doing so. The nuns, in addition, conceived of their role in helping to secure salvation for all souls as a principal means by which they brought happiness to Christ. The commitment to others in the context of the visionaries' subtle engrossment in Christ helps to account for the coincidence of interiority and sociability that characterizes the convent's mysticism and which is nowhere more apparent than in the relationships among the sisters.

Communal Authorship and Writing as a Spiritual Practice

Both the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* were collectively written during the last decades of the thirteenth and first years of fourteenth century by an unknown number of nuns. Working with Gertrude, one or several nuns, who remain anonymous, were

principally responsible for four of the *Herald*'s five books (sections). Nuns whose names are lost to us produced the *Book of Special Grace*, of whose creation Mechtild was not even aware until it was near completion. Moreover, there are traces in each work of the voices of an unspecified number of additional women, whose individual contributions varied and cannot be reconstructed with precision. In this cloistered community, influence was likely exerted in all manner of directions through a variety of ways – including through talk among sisters, overhearing bits of conversation, and casual observation. Neither work is individualistic; both tell us about Gertrude, Mechtild, and their sisters as their experiences were refracted through the sieve of memory (Gertrude's, Mechtild's, that of their sisters), and thus they also tell us about the power of their principal subjects' personae. They do so through the perspective of the multiple sisters who participated in creating them and who regarded participation in this literature as a privilege: "Me," exclaimed one of the *Herald*'s unnamed writers, God has chosen "to make me the minister of the disposition of these most holy revelations" (*Le Hérault*, SC 331, 5:35:2:1–5, 272).

Helfta's bookish environment is an important context for the monastery's mysticism. Generating the Helfta literature – speaking, taking dictation, composing, editing – was a sustained effort in which the community participated as a spiritual practice. The Helfta writings give witness to what we might call a mysticism of literary creativity, whose larger context is the wonder evoked by the written word, the value accorded at Helfta to intellectual engagement, and the connection Abbess Gertrude encouraged between formal education and piety. The nuns regarded their literary exertions as fitting into a long tradition of writings – those associated with John the Evangelist, Catherine of Alexandria, and Mechtild of Magdeburg, for example – that revealed Christ's relationship with his friends and thus awakened their readers' love and reverence.

The convent's commitment to writing had consequences that spilled over into the nuns' relationship with the saints. Gertrude sought among heaven's inhabitants fellowship with those renowned for their writing: with the Evangelist and Bernard of Clairvaux (see Chapter 16, this volume) she discussed the writing process and the power of words, finding in their companionship support for her own labors. Several of the co-authors of the Helfta writings received revelations that centered on their literary pursuits. These revelations communicated to them Christ's love for them, his encouragement of their activities, and approbation of their completed compositions.

The Helfta writings were calculated primarily for a reading audience within the convent, although there is no evidence that the intended audience was limited to enclosed women. Readers with cloistered relatives may have enjoyed trying to attribute specific visions to particular sisters. The religious communities with which Helfta shared confraternity, as well as the houses with which their patrons were connected and at some of which the nuns counted female relatives, may have been included among the intended readership. Clergy who provided for the sacramental needs of the sisters may also have read the women's writings, enlarging the circle of readers further still.

As Felix Vernet noted long ago, few works of mysticism are more manifestly liturgical than the Helfta writings (Vernet 220–223, 270), according to which creative assimilation of traditional monastic observances provides the foundation for the flowering of

visionary mysticism. Something about corporate religious worship – its fostering of awareness in the nuns of their busy collaboration with the communion of saints, kindling of nuanced self-reflection, and stimulating of the intellectual appetite – seems to have been conducive to visions and to ecstasy. Receiving communion and gazing at the elevated host were frequently the occasion for Mechtild and Gertrude to merge with Christ. Public communal worship disclosed to them the pains of purgatory and catapulted them into heaven; they heard the voices of Mary, the saints, and the angels mingle with their own to offer praise and thanksgiving to God during office and mass. The sisters were, moreover, curious about one another's experiences during liturgy, and visions allowed them to perceive the attitudes – lackluster, ardent – animating the devotions of individuals in the community. The Helfta literature highlights the importance of formal, prescribed behavior, conceiving of mystical experience and liturgical observance as, for the most part, complementary.

The Helfta writings therefore bear the imprint of the whole convent in which they took shape. They are suffused with representations of the achievements, trials, desires, and devotions of an indeterminate number of nuns, which are tucked into or trigger the visions that come to Gertrude and to Mechtild. Sometimes visions attest to Christ's regard for others as when, for example, Mechtild one day in choir spied Christ in the form of a young man and heard him say to one of Mechtild's sisters, "I shall follow you wherever you go," as he held open for her the book from which she read. Visions that are prompted by those soliciting Gertrude's or Mechtild's mediation periodically break open others' preoccupations. We learn, for instance, of a woman who confided in Gertrude her puzzlement that she received no fruit from the prayers offered on her behalf. Subsequently, God relayed a series of questions to Gertrude, with instructions to put these to her inquiring sister; reflection on these would illuminate for the nun the way of prayer. Thus nudged aside by the content of her revelation or by the person or circumstance that occasioned it, the visionary herself sometimes occupies a subordinate position in the accounts in which her visions figure.

The Helfta mystical writings offer a synaesthetic explosion of images for the entertainment and edification of the reader. Liquid and light, feasting and dancing, ornate vestments and brilliant jewels, foliage and flowers adorn pages drenched in a kaleidoscope of color and punctuated with sighs, whispers, and song, offering sometimes chummy, sometimes erotic, now regal, now homey delights. The convent's mysticism – joyous, solemn, and ribboned with praise for God – underscores the value of obedience to Christ, to the Rule, and to the Abbess; it also supports orthodox teaching and the dominant ecclesiastical structures, even while providing mystical alternatives to the authority of the priesthood (Bynum 1982). The Helfta writings are shot through with confidence in the weighty part the sisters' liturgical piety plays in the cosmic praise of God and the objective ordering of the universe; they accentuate the contribution of Gertrude's and Mechtild's' visions and experience of union to the their cooperative productivity with Christ in drawing all the faithful to him. Although not "how-to" literature, the graphic depiction of visions is calculated, in part, to foster envy in the reader of the revelations and ecstasies attributed to Gertrude, Mechtild, and other sisters, thus spurring her on to lay hold on, for herself, experiences such as these, a mark of intimacy with Christ and his friends.

The mystical forays the Helfta writings relate brought pleasure and happiness to their recipient, but they are more than an assertion of the joys and privileges of Gertrude and Mechtild. As scholarship from the last several decades has emphasized, mystical experience could serve as a means of self-integration as well as a source of authority. As a reputation-maker for many thirteenth-century women, it could sometimes confer acclaim or, alternatively, draw scrutiny on the communities with which they were affiliated (Bynum 1990: 4). In the thirteenth century – a century that saw the growing clericalization of the church and the rise of the university as the center of theological reflection – teaching, preaching, writing on matters theological, and providing spiritual guidance were identified as male prerogatives. Gertrude and Mechtild harnessed their direct access to God to write, to teach, to counsel and even to hear confession as well as to bind and to lose. Their visionary mysticism, in addition, allowed them to act as channels to the divine, providing fellow nuns with access to the sacraments, in a manner that was analogous to the priest's.

Christ, Atonement, and Bridal Mysticism

As already noted, the Helfta mysticism is Christocentric and concerned with the redemption of self and other. Its focus on the role of community in fostering salvation of the individual depends on the nuns' peculiar expression of Anselmian atonement theory joined with a complementary bridal mysticism. Central to the nuns' relationship with Christ is the notion of debt associated with atonement theory and a congruous notion of the mutual obligation in the marriage between Christ and the soul. The literature couples images of Christ as scrupulous judge and greedy usurer (and of the self as unworthy and indebted) with those of Christ as loyal friend and demanding lover (and of the self as necessary to Christ's happiness). Mechtild's and Gertrude's consciousness of the need to make good on their debt to Christ and to fulfill their spousal duties to him are the theological contexts in which the Christological focus of their mysticism spirals out to include a relentless concern for others.

The women assimilate Anselm's theory of atonement, but they shift focus. They concentrate not on Christ per se, on his singular role in restoring God's honor by rendering obedient service on which human beings defaulted, but rather on the cooperation of some human beings with Christ in paying the debt acquired by *other* human beings – and on the individual's own obligation to Christ, which instigates her assumption of the role of co-redeemer with him. As R. W. Southern argued so elegantly, Anselm's atonement theory displaced the role of the devil in redemption history, putting human beings (in the person of Christ) face-to-face with God. In contrast, the Helfta mysticism places human beings face-to-face with Christ himself, extolling their every-day intimacies. Sure that right relationship between the individual and God had consequences for right relationships with God for *all* the faithful, the nuns accentuate human participation in the economy of salvation, never ceasing to glorify God's gracious intervention in each act each human being contributes to the salvation of his people.

In shedding his blood, Christ made the perfect satisfaction for sinful humanity, mitigating his Father's anger and opening up the possibility for reconciliation between

human beings and God. Gertrude's and Mechtild's holiness consists in part in understanding that they are unworthy of this gift, which they can never repay in full, and that each additional gift Christ bestows – every gentle utterance, every rugged reproach – increases their indebtedness to him. Awareness of having to reckon with the demands of divine justice was never far from their consideration. There is little indication that the nuns worried about the implications of Christ's exercise of justice in relation to themselves, however. Fueled by a conviction of the basic goodness and efficacy of their own monastic exertions as well as of the fairness by which Christ appraises the life of the individual and metes out to each her due, they were motivated in their piety more by the expectation of reward than by the fear of punishment.

While it insists that Christ is just, the nuns' theology asserts simultaneously that Christ in his mercy overlooks the faults of his creatures, although it never fully works through the paradox it places in relief. The visionaries experienced Christ's tender mercies as immoderate and sometimes picture him as drunk with love to the point of repudiating his own judgment. As the visions relate, Christ's love is profligate, and he urges the women to recognize that his presence is ubiquitous. The mystics see themselves and their sisters embracing him, covering him with kisses, and cradling him; he reads with them, and he walks along side them, tending to their questions, woes, jealousies, and joys. Christ is delicate in his dealings. Thus we read, for example, that he lay next to Lady S. as she was dying so that she would not be uncomfortable; to her, it was as though she were cocooned in a cloud. When Sister M. was dying, Christ drew the breath from her lips, from which he made a rainbow whose arch stretched to his heart.

The monastery's mysticism insists that Christ is available to all the nuns. As Gertrud Jaron Lewis observed, Christ at Helfta is whomever (and whatever) one requires him to be (Lewis 303). He is, to the nuns, a downpour of rain and arrows of light. More frequently, images are drawn from a spectrum of social roles. Christ urges Mechtild to feed on his love as children nurse at their mother's breast, and as her mother, he promises to comfort his daughter in times of need. The nuns do not, however, associate with Christ as mother solely a sense of succor. Gertrude at least once perceived Christ as an exacting mother who trains her child to help with housework. He is, in addition, a proud, reliable, and compassionate father; a caring friend, demonstrative lover, loyal brother, attentive doctor, vulnerable baby; and an imposing king. The appeal of this imagery is in part the very range of the roles, through which the nuns attempt to approximate the many dimensions of Christ's care for those whom he prizes.

Scholars have rightly pointed to the centrality of bridal imagery to the convent's mysticism (McGinn 270). Characterized by an easy combination of sweetness and sometimes-erotic sensuality, this mysticism is unburdened by the overwrought yearnings that we find in some other thirteenth-century writings, including those of Mechtild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp. Although they sometimes voice doubt about Christ's love for them and acknowledge that complete felicity will not be theirs until death, Gertrude and Mechtild express almost-steady satisfaction in their contact with Christ. He is to them an ardent lover, given to longing with little restraint, and in hot pursuit. One night, Christ, greedy for Gertrude's company, allowed her only snatches of sleep, and while she slept, he infiltrated her in dreams. He elicits love and displays of

affection from those whom he adores: as Gertrude lay in bed, Christ pulled his right arm from the cross, clasped her, and putting his rosy mouth to her ear whispered: "May my unceasing love be your continual languor; may your delicious love be my most welcome pleasure" (*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:45:1–3, 202–206). Confessing his own neediness on another occasion, he asked that Gertrude console him, just as he had previously soothed her. Requests such as this are embedded in an expectation of mutuality, in the mutual need and obligation that pervades the relationship, one of courtship and of surrender, between bride and bridegroom. Christ gives generously – of kisses and conversation, compliments and time – and does so in anticipation of return. The mutuality that Christ craves with those whom he loves carries with it a sense of indenture. Indeed, Christ proclaims his indebtedness to all the sisters for their devotion. In promising he will repay them for this and telling them of his plans, hatched in eternity, to do so, Christ, the greatest of lovers, models a love in which a sense of indebtedness is integral.

The Helfta mysticism does not overlay bridal mysticism onto Anselmian atonement theory. It underscores their complementarity: both love and justice make debtors of us all. Whereas modern minds may worry over the (apparent) tension between love and justice, what captured the nuns' imagination was the soul's indebtedness to Christ to which both sin and love (which constrains the beloved to respond to the lover) give rise. This indebtedness was to them a boon exactly because it fueled a reciprocal relationship with Christ. Love and pardon, at Helfta, came with strings attached; and the nuns were flattered by Christ's assessment that they had much to give *him*. They could not conceive of a relationship with God that did not entail give-and-take. In this context, giving was a privilege. In the convent's optimistic religiosity, infused with a sense of life as progressive movement toward conformity with Christ, human beings become Christ-like to the extent that they *wish* to give what their judge and lover demands of them.

This yearning to give was expressed as a desire to gratify God that incorporated God's own desire to satisfy those whom he loves. In the Helfta mysticism, therefore, indebtedness to Christ implicates more than the individual person in relation to God. This is mysticism in which others – living and dead, saints and sinners – occupy an essential and pronounced place. The prominent role of the dead in their lives was, to the nuns, a confirmation and a strengthening of their bond with Christ. They acknowledged implicitly that one is not strictly obliged to return Christ's gifts, all of which are unconditional. Not to reciprocate, however, was to be deprived of pleasure in this life. It was, moreover, to incur damnation, to be cut off from the community of the faithful.

Mary and the Saints

The convent's writings are flush with revelations that herald Mary's and the saints' joint tenancy with the sisters in the life of the cloister, indicating the nuns perceived them as confederates with whom they worshiped God and attesting to a lively collegiality among all parties.

Such visions triggered the nuns' reflections on who they were and were meant to be, raising questions about the change they wished to see in themselves, to which they aspired, and which the saints sometimes aided them in accomplishing. God's Mother

and the saints communicated their merits to the sisters; Mary and saints from various states of life (e.g., a count, a Dominican priest, a thief) offered comfort and dispensed advice. Visions urged the reader to turn to the inhabitants of heaven in order to grapple with matters of love and loss, indulge in the pleasures of memory, and explore the strength of liturgical and private piety.

In visions, Christ gathers into one community all those whom he loves: he is a king in whose sumptuous court every member is co-consort; the *paterfamilias* of a large, convivial family; a sympathetic friend surrounded by an expansive circle of intimates. The Helfta writings draw especially on nuptial imagery to talk about the relationship among all those Christ loves. In this context, the women's perception of Christ's nearness couples with an attitude of obligation to their Spouse to feed their commitment to the whole community of the elect. Bridal mysticism at Helfta was not all high emotion, not all impassioned desire and its fulfillment. There are formal commitments connected with the relationship with the Beloved. These are nowhere more apparent than in the imposition Christ makes on his bride to assume the right attitude toward his friends and family. As a husband entrusts his bride to his mother, so Christ delivers the soul whom he loves to Mary, and he obliges his bride to accept as her own and to grow in love for his family and friends. There is a self-consciously circular pattern to this mysticism: intimacy with Christ entered the nuns into the society of Mary and the saints, fellowship with whom tied them more tightly to Christ.

Mary and the saints emboldened the sisters to strive after experiences such as those to which they were privy when they were alive. In the midst of prayer, Gertrude saw Christ hold John tenderly and tightly; she then prostrated herself at Christ's feet, her humility keeping her at a distance. The Beloved Disciple called to her, saying,

> Do not let my fellowship [with Christ] turn you away. Behold the neck that I embraced, and which provides for thousands and thousands of lovers, the mouth that by kissing offers many kinds of sweetness, and the ears that keep the whispered secrets of all. (*Le Héraut*, 4:4:10:7–11, 76–78)

When Gertrude saw John in Christ's arms, this was not only an illustration of Christ's love for his saints and a source of inspiration. John insisted that Christ's embrace was available to Gertrude and to "thousands and thousands" of others whom Christ loves. Visions such as this claim implicitly that one person's intimacy with Christ does not jeopardize the relationship of others with Christ. They are a beckoning. This was probably an important message for the community; theirs was a cloister characterized not only by respect and sympathy but also jealousy (exactly of others' liaisons with Christ, for example) and competitiveness (with regard to a variety of spiritual gifts). Gertrude at least once carped to Christ when he disclosed a secret to another that he withheld from her. There are hints that being alone with Christ was a proposition some among the nuns found attractive. Gertrude seems, for example, to have felt ambivalent toward Mary, jealous of her closeness with Christ. As Wilhem Preger noticed over one hundred years ago, Gertrude, when she nuzzled the Baby Jesus or otherwise encountered him in visions, did not always wish to share him with his Mother (724) and sometimes resisted doing so.

Mary and John for the most part neither undermined nor softened Christ's expectations but worked with Christ to administer justice. The nuns did not count on Mary's indulgence, and rarely do heaven's inhabitants appeal to Christ for leniency on behalf of the living. The intercession of the saints is primarily directed toward drawing souls to Christ within the constraints of divine justice. The nuns' perception was that the business of accounting for sinful souls, and in shepherding them toward salvation, was a labor Christ and his heavenly consorts assumed cooperatively.

In its recognition of the snug and sober bonds between the living and the society of the saints the Helfta mysticism is in keeping with larger currents in thirteenth-century piety. What sets it apart is the unabashed enthusiasm it conveys about the nuns' trust in the relevance to the saints of the women's own devotions and mystical encounters as well as their emotions and expression of these. The nuns experienced vividly the medieval belief that liturgical devotions were a service to Mary and the saints. We read, for example, that through chant, they provided the saints with opportunity to loiter intently with memories central to saints' joy in heaven: Catherine of Alexandria informed Mechtild that if a sister sang "come my beloved, come into your spouse's bridal chamber," this would recall to the saint her martyrdom, when upon hearing Christ summon her with these words, Catherine's heart melted with love. When grief strikes her daughters at the death of Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, the Abbess catches their tears in a gold chalice, and in exchange for each teardrop, a stream of the divinity flows into her. The *Book of Special Grace* instructs the reader that there is no action that if performed in praise of God does not increase the joy of the saints. The writings make clear that Christ is responsible for the expansion of the saints' joy. It accents in the sisters' contribution to this joint enterprise with Christ, insisting that the sisters have direct and substantive bearing on the saints' experience of heaven, having the power to change it for the better.

Purgatory

Purgatorial mysticism was important at to the Helfta nuns, energized by a commitment to pay the debt they owed to Christ and a determination to please him. Christ's identification with those destined for salvation is such that, as he explained to Gertrude, each time her prayers freed a soul from purgatory, it was he who was released from captivity. Visions populated with needy nuns and neighbors, *conversi* and other monastery personnel, patrons and family members as well as anonymous multitudes reveal that the nuns were sensitive to a spectrum of experiences in purgatory, among them physical afflictions, marred consciences, and frustrated hungers.

The Helfta mysticism conveyed the power of the sisters' participation with Christ and suffering souls in liberating the latter into their Beloved's embrace. Once a sister appeared to Gertrude, darting with joy toward her bridegroom, only to collapse at his feet; as the sisters in choir intoned *tibi supplicatio commendet Ecclesiae*, the soul picked herself up and rushed into Christ's waiting arms. The recording of visions such as this communicated the pressing need of the dead; they buoyed and congratulated the nuns in their liturgical piety, announcing that their monastic system was effective (Bynum

1982). The mysticism conveys that a wide sweep of activities were pregnant with the possibility to purge, to comfort, to move souls toward heaven. In conversation with the soul of Bro. H., Gertrude learned that if she did not commit the fault for which he was punished (he followed his will rather than others' advice), her upright behavior would relieve his suffering. A dying nun hoped the pain of her last illness would expiate souls, although in distinction to many medieval women, vicarious suffering does not dominate the nuns' purgatorial piety.

The nuns' purgatorial mysticism supported the pious devotions that structured their monastic life, and helped them to make sense of rule and custom and to derive meaning from such unavoidable and destructive experiences as illness. It also helped them make theological sense of their contributions to purgatory's inmates. Gertrude learned that Christ, eager for a pretext to free purgatory's inmates from bondage, receives the gifts the women offer on their behalf. As he explained, those in purgatory are like soldiers who are without the means to ransom themselves from the king in whose thrall they are held, the very king who longs to release them, and who will do so, but only if his knights make payment equivalent to what the soldiers owe. Like this king, Christ accepts payments made on behalf of the destitute dead. The nuns are like the king's knights; they proffer gifts for the deliverance of souls. This mysticism thus accounts for the role of Christ in the work of redemption. And yet the questions to which it responds are not primarily Christological. They address instead the logic of the nuns partnership in the processes that govern purgatory.

This mysticism delineates, moreover, the theological rationale by which not only the recipient but also the donor gains from the offerings she makes on behalf for those in purgatory. As the visions relate, every gift from God is in excess of what justice demands because all of us are egregious sinners. Gertrude and Mechtild recognize that Christ's gifts are gratuitous, in the sense that they are unmerited, but they are not unconditional. The nuns could make reparation to Christ by giving to another the gifts he lavished on them. And so they gave – especially to souls in purgatory. In consequence of their good works, Christ rewarded them with yet more gifts, causing them to give again to indigent souls. Thus, a cycle of exchange between Christ and the visionaries ensues. In this way, the women's conviction of indebtedness feeds a sense of themselves as co-redeemers with Christ, a self-understanding that Barbara Newman has argued characterizes the spirituality of medieval women more broadly (1995).

The Helfta writings nevertheless betray the women's sometimes indifference to the needs of the dead; from time to time, furthermore, the sisters' efforts for souls were checkered with boredom and diminished by distraction. It was not always easy for them to summon up love for purgatory's inhabitants, especially when the souls in question were, while they were alive, unknown to the nuns. The visionaries carried to their sisters Christ's command to expand their horizon of concern, and their mystical excursions taught them that compassion was crucial to meeting these more generous obligations. As mystical exploits tell it, obligation and emotion rightly work in tandem. Cultivating compassion while maintaining formal commitments is in large measure what both the mystical and the work-a-day religious life was about, a continuing quest for conformity with Christ's own attitude toward sinners. This mysticism does not

advocate unreserved compassion, however. The nuns accepted the eternal agony of some of God's creatures with equanimity.

When the sisters aid those in purgatory, their assistance is not motivated by either a selfless pitying for those in need or by a noxious concentration on the self. The productivity of their efforts is dependent on their inflection through correct attitude. This is a safeguard against toiling for the dead with exclusive concentration on its significance for self, but it is by no means a rebuke to those whose offerings were informed by the recognition of their significance to self. It is not so much a matter of a generosity to the dead that is energized by the cries of others (or the cry of Christ) *or* is a realization of the benefits to self that giving to another holds out. It is both. The nuns could not give to another without receiving from Christ in return.

Sisters

A curiosity about their sisters' spiritual life and a sense of responsibility for their well-being are at play in the many instances in which Gertrude and Mechtild receive visions peopled by their sisters. Christ encourages watchfulness of their fellow nuns on the part of the mystics precisely as he goads them to delve deeper into their selves. The Helfta literature indicates that encounters with Christ, Mary, and the saints heightened the mystic's sensitivity to her internal state, providing pockets of privacy, screened from the duties and diversions of the common life and coaxing their recipient into sustained self-examination. We find, however, that even in the midst of privileged, personal moments of revelation and of ecstasy, the visionaries do not cast aside for long – and sometimes not at all – consciousness of their sisters, concern for them, or work on their behalf. As we have seen, visions at Helfta were not intended exclusively for their recipient but to further the welfare of others.

There is fluidity between the visionaries' mystical engagement and thoughtfulness about others, as when Gertrude wondered while kissing Christ's wound what prayer the sisters might recite to please him as did her kisses. Moreover, not only does the visionary bring petitions and promises back and forth between Christ and his heavenly court, on the one hand, and her sisters, on the other. Christ, Mary, and the saints come to her in part in order to make themselves more readily available to others.

The visionaries, furthermore, frequently incorporated others into their experience of union: when Mechtild and Christ nest their hearts, one inside the other, rays of light shoot from Mechtild's limbs, traveling to those for whom she has previously prayed. When Mechtild is assimilated to Christ, she did not forsake her sisters but shared with them the gift she received, as Giovanna della Croce observed decades ago (28). Just as the saints facilitate for the sisters the kinds of contact with Christ they treasured, so, too, do the visionaries. Mechtild, during Christmas mass, held the Baby Jesus in her arms and then offered him to each of her sisters, and the Infant kissed each one. There is no indication that preoccupation with others, or the mystic's sharing of her experience with others, either dissipated for her its enjoyment or diluted its significance.

The content of revelations is often precipitated by the devotions of the sisters who figure in them. Gertrude and Mechtild sometimes assume the role of witness, observing their sisters' response to such phenomena, even if the sisters (as the visions relate) are themselves unaware of the phenomena! At matins on the eve of the Feast of the Nativity, Mary gave her Baby to each of the sisters, and Gertrude perceived that some held the Child carefully, while others allowed the his head to droop. Gertrude understood by this that those who had no will but God's will supported the Baby's head as if on a soft pillow, and those whose wills were inflexible allowed the Infant's head to dangle. The visions could also provide insight into the soul of an esteemed companion, exposed friendship's intricacies as well as underlined its importance, and probably, therefore, increased the friendship's worth.

In visions in which one woman apprehends aspects of the experience of another, boundaries between self and other blur, underscoring the absence at Helfta of an absolute sense of freedom from the intrusions of another into one's interior self. There was little room in the monastery for contact with God (or his friends) in which the activities of self were wholly hidden from others – or wholly transparent to the self.

Continuities and Discontinuities with Cistercian Predecessors

The mysticism of the nuns was both in continuity with the spirituality of their twelfth-century Cistercian predecessors (see Chapter 16, this volume) and a significant departure from it. The nuns inherited from the larger monastic tradition an appreciation for the taut braiding of literary learning and desire for God. The role of experience was paramount to the content of the nuns' thought, as it was for earlier Cistercians. Public, communal worship, meditation on scripture and other holy texts as well as private demonstrations of devotion were crucially connected to theological pursuit; visionary mysticism provided access to knowledge and might be fostered through the perusal of the written word. The nuns share with the twelfth-century members of their order an intense interest in the soul's relationship to Christ. As did previous Cistercians, they both recognized that desire is a privilege and sought to foster a longing for Christ in their readers, the larger context of which was optimism about the individual's ability to take initiative in a process of spiritual growth whose end was union with Christ. Bridal mysticism is a central theme in the nuns' writings, reminiscent of the spirituality and sensuality associated with Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), on whose writings the nuns drew.

In contrast with earlier Cistercian spirituality, and in keeping with the thirteenth-century monastic practice of cultivating visions, the encounter between Christ and the soul is frequently experienced in revelations, which, laden with talk and touch – including kisses and caresses that would have troubled a number of the nuns' contemporaries – bombarded the senses while enlivening the intellect. Like the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–1167), the Helfta writings are part of a larger current of monastic literature linking human relationships with love of God. Unlike Bernard, however, the nuns do not attend in detail to the delights and the sorrows of friendship, nor do they, in the manner of Aelred, express soaring enthusiasm for the

central role of one-on-one relationships in a common growth of friends in love of God. Rather than focusing on individuals (friend, brother, mother), the nuns focused on the larger community (in heaven, purgatory, and on earth) and thus sought to shape the person and aid in her movement toward salvation.

There are additional, important differences between the nuns and their Cistercian predecessors. Whereas Bernard was torn between the call of contemplation and demands of service, the nuns emphasize a sense of their mutual enrichment. It is thus perhaps not surprising that the nuns, far more than their twelfth-century counterparts, employ images of the experience of heaven as a consummation of the common life rather than images of heaven as rest and reprieve, which figure prominently in Bernard's depictions of heaven. Like Bernard, so for the nuns, the soul's joy continues to climb in heaven. Unlike the monk's, the women's gaze lingers lightly on the experience of joy itself, alighting instead on the role the living play in augmenting the joy of the dead. The nuns share with such Cistercians as Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180–1240) a keen interest in purgatory's inhabitants, which occupies a pivotal place in the visions they and he recorded.

The Helfta mysticism is about more than the lone seer; it is about all her sisters. Visions and ecstasy are meant to draw forth in the visionary and her cloistered community diligent attentiveness to self as well as to the communion of saints, Christ, and her sisters. They seek to inculcate a sense of responsibility toward God and other – sister, saint, suffering soul – while adumbrating the positive consequence to the self of doing so and extolling the benefits of the monastic life as well as associated pieties. Given the intellectual climate at Helfta, and the authorizing power of visions, it should not surprise that this mysticism – and the literature to which it gave birth – would have substantial theological content.

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CHAPTER 21

Mysticism in the Spiritual Franciscan Tradition

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The momentous social and economic changes at work within western Europe after 1000 as a result of the Agrarian and Commercial Revolutions had their effect as well on the contours and content of Christian spirituality and, consequently, upon the shape of mystical experience. Bernard McGinn, the leading expert writing on Christian mysticism today, has noted that these social and economic changes were so significant by the thirteenth century as to create what he has called a "new mysticism," different and distinguishable from that of previous centuries (1998a: 12–30).

One of the individuals whose life and writings illustrate this new approach to the spiritual life was Francis of Assisi (see Chapter 19, this volume). It was his particular genius – in a context where the human person had value only in relation to one's rank in society and family – to appreciate anew that every human being, as a creature of God, not only had value in God's eyes but that everyone had a God-given ability to enter into and experience the life of the Trinity. This perspective was evident in the writings of the saint as he urged men and women to join in the praise of God and the experience of grace (Blastic 29). It was also evident from the very composition of the egalitarian fraternity that gathered around him: first, in the friars who came to him from every level of Christian society, but also, at a second moment, in the women who entered as followers of Clare and, third, in the lay men and women in the cities who gathered together in confraternities and gave themselves to a life of penance as a result of the preached message of the early friars. These developments all combined to lay the foundations for a more universal or "democratized" approach to Christian spirituality and opened the possibility, for the most fervent among them who desired and strove for it, of a more direct and immediate experience of the presence of God (Cusato 2012).

A second element that needs to be added to the foundation laid by Francis for his followers is the role that the cross of Christ came to play in his own life and spirituality. Whereas the themes of *minoritas* and *paupertas* were uppermost in the formation of the charism of the early Franciscans as evidenced in the first layers of the *Regula non bullata*,

it is the passion of Christ which began to enjoy a more prominent place in the spirituality of the Poverello after his return to Italy from Egypt in 1220. This emphasis in Francis was due both to his rapidly declining health as well as to the tense struggles within the Order between the founder himself and the clerical party over the future directions of the minorite phenomenon. The cross of Christ became for Francis not merely a symbol of pain and struggle but also and especially a sign of ultimate victory and healing. This growing prominence is exemplified in his experience on La Verna in September 1224. By all accounts, while profoundly meditating on the passion of Christ "on or around the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross," Francis began to manifest the mystery of the stigmata of Christ within his own body: a mystical experience of love as well as pain which gave him great inner sweetness and consolation (FA:ED 1: 263–265; FA:ED 2: 108; FA:ED 2: 630–639; Cusato 2006: 29–74).

Franciscan hagiography used this culminating experience in the life of Francis as the leitmotif for reading and interpreting the life of the saint of Assisi. Bonaventure in particular will structure his theological interpretation of Francis in his *Legenda maior* as a succession of cruciform experiences in which the founder progressively seeks and is marked by the cross of Christ, beginning with his prayer before the cross in the dilapidated church of San Damiano and up to his ecstatic experience on La Verna (Armstrong; Pellegrini). Indeed, for Bonaventure, the cross was the central image of Christian salvation: the "hidden center" of created existence and salvation history, as Zachary Hayes has emphasized, through which fallen creation must necessarily pass in order to be brought back by grace to redeemed existence in God (Hayes 1981). This absolute centrality of the cross is quite new in medieval theology and constitutes one of those newly emphasized themes of the new mysticism.

Another element that Bonaventure added to Franciscan reflection, by way of the influence of Thomas Gallus, is the integration of the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius as part of the understanding of mystical experience (McGinn 1998b: 81–96) (see Chapters 11 and 17, this volume). Union with God is not only to be construed as sweetness and light; it can also be shown to be – as demonstrated in the stigmatization experience – one of pain and darkness. Illumination, in other words, can also be experienced as a negative, as an absence: the apophatic experience of God's presence. Such a construct, brought into the oral and written expressions of mystical prayer, allows the human person to incorporate the negativities and setbacks of human life through the central symbol of the cross of Christ: the bittersweet fruit of the incarnational relationship which human beings and human history have with the God-man.

The Formative Ethos of the Spiritual Franciscans

This essay treats a particular group of Franciscans that coalesced after the death of Bonaventure known as the "Spiritual Franciscans." Who were these Spirituals? Contemporary scholarship prefers to identify these friars with those who, in the wake of the Second Council of Lyons (1274), began to clamor for their confreres to return to a more rigorous observance of the material poverty and social minority associated with Francis and his early companions. Located at first primarily in central Italy (especially

the Marches of Ancona) and associated with men like Angelo Clareno (c. 1255–1337), Conrad of Offida (c. 1237–1306), John of La Verna (1259–1322), Jacopone da Todi (1236–1306) and Ubertino da Casale (1259–1330?), the term eventually came to also encompass, in the early decades of the fourteenth century, friars in southern France (like Peter of John Olivi [1248–1298] and his followers) who equally sought to call the order back to a lifestyle akin to the real poor of their day and, they believed, to that of Christ and his apostles. Such calls, however, brought them into conflict with the leadership of their order and eventually with the church itself.

McGinn insists that a proper understanding of mysticism must take into account the historical context that shaped the experiences of these men and women and that provided the content for their spiritual journeys. We can identify at least four major components, all rooted in the early years of Franciscanism, which constituted the formative background of the mysticism of the Spiritual Franciscans.

First, it is crucial to recall that early Franciscanism – well before it became an important pastoral and intellectual force in medieval life and culture – began with a conscious physical withdrawal from the world of values at variance with those of the Gospel of Jesus. Indeed, as David Flood has forcefully reminded us: the early friars left Assisi (Flood 1984: 91–104; 1989: 7–10). Some of them – those of the Companions tradition – never returned; some others warily returned over the next decades to urban settings while striving to maintain a moral distance from its snares; and still others re-engaged with the world, physically as well as attitudinally. But it was this original impulse towards eremitism that shaped the mindset of the Spirituals. On the one hand, such friars maintained an adversarial relationship with the world and its false values. On the other hand, they cultivated a sense of interiority and prayerfulness that evolved into a desire not merely for solitude but to acquire a spirit of contemplation, sensing its supreme importance for human beings intent upon an authentic relationship with God. Such individuals constituted what Bonaventure called the *ordo contemplativus* (Ratzinger 43). As a result, the *eremi* of the early years evolved into veritable hermitages: places where the prayer of the heart was paramount.

Second, by the time of the death of Francis in 1226, the charism of the early friars had come to be identified with the voluntary embrace of material and spiritual poverty. In the earliest years of the fraternity, "the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ" (FA:ED 1: 70) pointed followers towards a positive reality: a life among the social *minores* of society (*humilitas*) and dedicated to the proper and just use of the goods of the earth (*paupertas*) where all had what was necessary to live. By the 1240s, however, with the return of the friars to the cities, whereas humility came to be transformed into an inner ascetical virtue, the notion of poverty came to be construed as a negative: the renunciation of the ownership of all things (Cusato 2006: 343–382). This understanding of poverty was then equated with the evangelical perfection of Jesus who said, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor; then come and follow me" (Matthew 19: 21). As such, Franciscan poverty came to be increasingly characterized by not a few Franciscan writers as the very fulfillment of the life of Christ.

This leads us to a third component. According to authors like Bonaventure and, after him, especially Peter of John Olivi, the men and women who were exponents of the life of evangelical poverty now constituted the vanguard of those who, by this way of

life, were ushering in the very culmination of human history and the return of Christ himself (Burr 1993; Potestà 1980). This fascination with history and the role of the Friars Minor within it became a major concern for the Spiritual Franciscans precisely because of the centrality of poverty. History, in the language of Olivi, must thus become "franciscanized" or "pauperized" if it is to truly reflect Christ come to full stature. This was an age that saw itself as living in "the eleventh hour" of human history. But the triumphant return of Christ must be preceded and led forward by those who were his own in the world: the evangelical poor.

However, this role was not without trial or opposition; for Christ was not only poor, he was crucified as well. The fourth and final component of Spiritual Franciscan identity is that, as indicated in the Book of Revelation, the culmination of history must first be preceded by the persecution of those living the life of evangelical perfection (absolute poverty) by the very ones antithetical to it: Antichrist. Hence, as noted earlier, the cross comes to symbolize the very life of Christ in the persecution of his followers; but it is also the indispensable prelude to the healing and redemption of human history. The Spiritual Franciscans, as the most ardent zealots of the life of absolute poverty, assailed by their confreres on this very issue, would see themselves in this same role.

In the history of Christian mysticism, the Spiritual Franciscans do not comprise a uniform group or cohesive school of thought. They can, however, be said to be represented by five men whose specific concerns and contributions allow them to be more or less divided into two groupings. The first group consists of two friars, Peter of John Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, who exemplified this fascination with human history and the role of the friars in bringing about its apocalyptic culmination. Their particular contributions to mysticism are to be found within their writings on this subject. At the other extreme, tucked away in eremitical settings prized by these friars, are two others, Roger of Provence (d. 1287) and John of La Verna, who demonstrated no obvious interest in these apocalyptic scenarios but have left – much in the tradition of Giles of Assisi (c. 1190–1262) – a small body of testimonies on the dynamics of the spiritual journey. And bridging the gap between these apocalyptic and eremitical friars, sharing elements with both of them, stands the poet Jacopone da Todi, whose famous *laude* exemplify both the importance of proper Christian action in the world and the essential unknow-ability of God.

The Spiritual Franciscans at the Crossroads of History: Olivi and Ubertino

A friar of Provençal origin, born in the vicinity of Béziers in 1248, Peter of John Olivi entered the Franciscan order in the early 1260s. Intellectually promising, he was quickly sent on for studies at the friars' *studium generale* in Paris (Manselli 1121–1133). Historians posit that he probably heard the famous 1266 sermon of Bonaventure on the feast of St. Francis in which he heralds the Poverello as the "angel of the sixth seal" (Revelation 7:2): a striking image which Bonaventure had already employed in the prologue to his *Legenda maior* and which Olivi will use in his own reading of salvation history (FA:ED 1: 70). Olivi occupies an important place in the complex story of the

Spiritual Franciscans, especially once his notion of *usus pauper* came to be used as the rallying cry of the zealots of poverty against the leadership of the order for a return to a lifestyle more consistent with that of the involuntary poor of society (Burr 1989).

Although he was known to have had a close rapport with the laity of his region, offering them counsel and encouragement in spiritual matters, Olivi has not left us – as far as we know – any specific treatises on mysticism or the mystical ascent in the manner of Bonaventure. However, more like Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), the famous Calabrian abbot whose apocalyptic reading of history had been extraordinarily formative of his own thought, Olivi was also, at root, a superb exegete of the Christian scriptures. These texts were believed to contain the record of the relationship of humanity to God as well as clues for unlocking the mysteries of salvation history: past, present as well as future. As such, it is in his commentaries on the various books of Scripture where we find some of his most significant writing, including that on the centrality of mystical knowledge.

Indeed, Olivi was the most faithful medieval assimilator of Joachim's apocalyptic view of history. Differing from Bonaventure, whose own apocalyptic viewpoints had to be tempered given the tumult of his times, Peter was able to assimilate the trinitarian structure of history adopted by the Calabrian abbot which anticipated the coming, within history not beyond it, of a qualitatively new and different Third Age of the Spirit. And this age was quite near.

Olivi believed that he was living on the cusp of the transition from the Second into the Third Age or, more specifically, from the sixth period of the Second Age into the seventh and co-extensive period of the Third. Exactly when this *transitus* might occur is not a major concern for us. But what is critical for Olivi are the characteristics that human life will exhibit in this dawning seventh period. For what will make the Third Age qualitatively different from its predecessors is the in-breaking of the full life of the Spirit that will impart an *intellectus spiritualis* upon those human beings ready and willing to receive it. And those are ready whose lives are in conformity with the evangelical perfection of Christ in his poverty.

This spiritual understanding was not of an intellectual order (one of superior intelligence) but rather of an intimate, fuller and more immediate experience of God – hence, the connection to mysticism. It had already begun to make its appearance in the sixth period (as evidenced by the lives and writings of Joachim and Francis), as this spiritual gift imparted a fuller, keener understanding of the literal sense of the Scriptures, the Word of God for the guidance of human history. But now, in the seventh period, the *intellectus spiritualis* (spiritual understanding) would continue to elevate the human person even further into God and transform the individual through a more direct experience of mystical seeing: in short, *visio* (vision) will now transcend *intellectus* (intelligence). Thus, human history is moving progressively towards less and less mediated knowledge to one in which the unmediated experience of God – the pure gift of the Lover – will reign supreme.

This is why the final historical period of human existence is best characterized as an experience of *visio* or *contemplatio* (contemplation). Indeed, the Third Age of the Spirit will see the constitution of that highest order of being conceptualized by Bonaventure – the *ordo contemplativus* – where the knowledge of God will become experienced not

through the apprehension of the mind but through, what Olivi calls, *gustus et affectus* (tasting and feeling).

David Burr has indicated several passages in the writings of Olivi that exemplify this transition in modes of knowing. In a text found in his *Commentary on Job*, Olivi remarks:

> Just as contemplatives see clearly and explicitly through divine illumination what they once held implicitly and enigmatically through faith, so Job now sees more clearly and explicitly what he saw earlier through faith and through some contemplation, though not as explicitly or intensely nor with such perfect *sensus* or *gustus*. (Burr 1993: 129)[1]

We are thus in the realm of contemplation. Note the emphasis of the adverbs in this passage – "implicitly and enigmatically," "not as explicitly or intensely" – and the acknowledgement that in the Second Age of the Son, men and women have had the experience of "*some* contemplation." But it is not yet the full experience of it. Hence, contemplation will reach its fullness only in the *visio* that will be imparted to the human person in the Third and Final Age where the grasping of the mind will be superseded and fulfilled in mystical experience. Moreover, drawing upon the language and categories of Pseudo-Dionysius as they were appropriated and used by authors of the new mysticism like Thomas Gallus and Bonaventure, Olivi describes this experience of the soul more appropriately in apophatic terms: illumination as a form of darkness. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Olivi explains:

> The best mode of seeking God is to be rightly drawn upward, in a superintellectual way, until the mind's apex, separated from all being, understands the Supersubstantial Existent above all things and knows through full ignorance the things that are beyond ignorance. *Perfect unknowing is the knowing of him who is beyond all that is known.* This is entering the darkness or cloud, along with Moses. (McGinn 1998a: 121)[2]

What Olivi is describing is a kind of knowledge but one in which the will is more operative than the mind. That is why in describing this state he prefers to use sensory words like *gustus* and *affectus.* Here we are in the realm of mystical knowing, given in love, to be experienced rather than apprehended by the intellect.

Thus, Olivi's contribution to Christian mysticism appears most clearly in the context of his examination of the progression of human history and the human beings who populate it. He locates the fullness of the mystical experience in the sixth and seventh periods of the transition between the Second and Third Ages of human history, which is on the verge of being definitively transformed by divine grace.

The writings of Ubertino da Casale present a somewhat different case. While strongly influenced by Olivi's view of history (they lived together in Florence at the Franciscan friary of Santa Croce between 1285 and 1289), his writings on the subject are much less schematic and more intentionally inspirational, one might even say devotional, than those of his southern French counterpart. For Ubertino was writing not as an expositor or exegete but rather as a preacher attempting to incite his audience towards a more faithful life of prayer and poverty in the manner of Francis. Not associated with the initial events of the Spiritual Franciscans that involved Peter of Macerata (d. 1307)

and Angelo Clareno in the Marches of Ancona, Ubertino had come onto the scene of history as a fiery preacher in the area of Perugia, his sermons earning him house arrest in 1304 by order of the Dominican pope, Benedict XI (Callaey 55; Damiata 20). His Franciscan confreres incarcerated him on Mount La Verna. Here Ubertino wrote his monumental *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* (1304–1305) (Ubertino). And it is here – rather than in his voluminous polemical writings on the question of Franciscan poverty delivered before the Curia and representatives of the order during the lengthy debates at Avignon in 1309–1310 – that we find his contribution to Christian mysticism.

The *Arbor vitae* is divided into five books. Books I–V are "considerations"[3] on the life of Jesus which, structurally, follow a similar treatment of the same theme by Bonaventure in his *Lignum vitae* (and in another contemporary document of immense popularity: John de Caulibus' *Meditations on the Life of Christ*) (Lesnick; Cusato 1999: 142). Book V is unique, being a commentary on the Book of Revelation, stressing the urgency of conforming oneself to Christ. Ubertino chose the image of the tree since it is the typically Franciscan theme of the centrality of the cross in human and salvation history that he wants to set forth for his readers. Thus, for Ubertino, *arbor = lignum = crux.*

It is in the second prologue where Ubertino announces the mystical intent of his work: every human being, he says, is called to ecstasy or, more precisely, to the *amor exstaticus* which Dionysius, in his *Divine Names*, ascribes to Paul when he anticipates himself being "caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). "Ecstasy" is defined as being "taken [or made to be] outside of oneself" (Ubertino prol. 2, 8a).[4] Thus, those who would truly be *viri spirituales* become ecstatics only by "thinking of God in all things, rather than of themselves" (Ubertino: 2, 8a).[5] The true ecstatic belongs to God and no longer to oneself. To do so is to become (like) Jesus himself: he who was the *unctus* (anointed) of God. Indeed, the ecstatic's love of God is directed to all three Persons of the Trinity who, Ubertino claims, are each related to the word *unctus*: the Father is the one anointing, the Spirit is the anointing itself and the Son is the one anointed (Ubertino prolog 2, 8a).[6]

The attainment of this ecstatic love is thus the goal of Ubertino's considerations on the life of Jesus (Books I–IV). The cross of Christ is the central mystery that provides the clue to salvation history. As he notes, echoing the opening of the Early Rule: "Christ does not invite you to perform miracles but to follow his footsteps and to ponder and embrace the scandal of his cross" (Ubertino II: 4, 97a; FA:ED 1: 63–64).[7] The quintessential importance of the cross is explained in a highly original chapter (IV, 37), where Ubertino enumerates five different forms of the cross, each illustrative of a different modality of the spiritual life: the cross of Jesus, the cross of Mary, the cross of the perfect, the proficient and beginners in the spiritual journey. Moreover, the cross of the perfect (that is, of his most ardent followers) yields both sorrow (*dolor*) as well as joy (*gaudium*) in proportionate measure as the gift of the Spirit. This represents the paradoxical, bittersweet fruit of the cross which unites in itself both abnegation as well as triumph. As in the stigmata, the combination of these two opposites expresses the essence of the experience of mystical union (Ubertino IV: 37, 381a–397a).

Ubertino's treatment of the cross summarizes his understanding of mystical union. But what is truly original in Ubertino, according to the great German historian of mysticism Kurt Ruh (393–394), is that the Franciscan finds the model for the

soul's union with God in the hypostatic union of the God-Man Jesus. For, just as in Jesus there is a total emptying of the human personality (the absence of a *supposit*, in philosophical terms) which is replaced by the Spirit, so too must it be in the soul of the one who wishes to attain ecstasy through the perfection of the cross. In other words, whoever wishes to be united to God by love and will must surrender all love of self and of another, indeed all willing, so that the Spirit actually becomes one's loving and willing for God. As Ubertino puts it: "You will nothing but him and for him" (Ubertino IV: 37, 382b).[8] This is the experience of the total abnegation of the cross: "not as I will but as you will" (Luke 22:42). It is the dynamic of mystical union in the soul.

But, while keenly intent on explaining the theological dynamics of this union, Ubertino is also anxious to expound on the experience of the union of the soul with God. For, whereas he, like Olivi before him, characterizes this experience as one of *gustus* (tasting), Ubertino's preferred way of describing the highest state is that of *quies* (rest) or sometimes *vera et plena tranquillitas* (Ubertino IV: 37, 389a).[9] The surrendered soul is at peace with God and itself; it is at rest. But the Franciscan is quick to differentiate this concept from the indifference implied in the doctrine of the heresy of the Free Spirit (Ubertino IV: 37, 389b). This quietude is the result of having taken into oneself – absorbing, as it were – all the evils one sees and feels around oneself (e.g., injuries done to the neighbor, personal suffering, sin in others and in oneself, etc.) – and bringing them – so as to transform and heal them – to the cross of Jesus Christ in which both *dolor* (sorrow, pain) and *gaudium* (joy, gladness) are commingled. *Quies* is not detached indifference; it is ultimate resolution in Christ through the blood of the cross (Potestà 1985: 291–294). To arrive at this point in one's soul is to have entered into the contemplative sleep of the beloved disciple, resting upon the heart of the Master.

The Spiritual Franciscans and the Eremitical Life: Roger of Provence and John of La Verna

In some respects, at the opposite extreme of these concerns stands the eremitical experience of the successors of the companions of Francis: those who remained far from the madding crowd, nestled in their remote *eremi*, at a distance from the turmoil and tumult rending the church and the Franciscan order. As we have seen, the critical role played by aspects of the eremitical experience like *contemplatio*, *gustus* and *quies* were not far removed from the writings of those Spiritual Franciscans physically engaged in the polemical struggles on behalf of evangelical poverty being waged against its opponents both in the order and in the church at large. And while these notions were part of a larger conceptual framework (that is, placed within the broader context of history), they were, perhaps, less of a daily reality for these activist authors. By contrast, these same concepts were very much experiential realities for those who had remained in the hermitages. And yet these friars, in their own way, were not indifferent to the larger political and ecclesiological issues that their own poor and humble lifestyle pointed to.

It is not as if these issues were inconsequential to the friars in the hermitages. An examination of a text like the *dicta* of Blessed Conrad of Offida (*Verba Fr. Conradi*:

370–392; FA:ED 3: 127–137), a Spiritual Franciscan in the hermitages of the Marches, illustratres this. However, within the eremitical tradition of the Spiritual Franciscans, the words and deeds of two other friars, Roger of Provence and John of La Verna, have come down to us in which their visionary experiences are the primary focus of the texts. Both men are presented as ecstatics: men gifted with ecstatic experiences, nicely mirroring the critical importance of this experience underscored by Ubertino da Casale.

Roger of Provence, a friar-priest in the province of Provence, is known to us through two sources: a *vita* drawn up by his friar-confessor, Raymond-Peter, and a series of *meditationes* or sayings of Roger. The latter can be found in the *Chronicle of the XXIV Generals* (c. 1374–1378) (*Meditationes*: 393–406) whereas the *vita* is reported elsewhere (*Catalogus Codicum* 1: 346–362). Little is known of his actual life. It seems that he entered the order in 1275 and died, probably in Uzès, in 1287. Between those two dates, he had become master of novices in Montpellier in 1278 and, the following year, was also named custos[10] of Avignon (a position which he seems to have held until his death). He had a good knowledge of Latin and was apparently fairly well read in the literature of the Christian tradition (Carozzi 81–105).

But his real importance to history is the account given by Raymond-Peter of his visions. For with Roger, we have an unusual but wholesale concentration on the ecstasies experienced by this friar. Indeed, as McGinn relates it, whereas in the previous century such ecstasies were believed to be rare and of brief duration, Roger is reported to have experienced innumerable ecstatic moments – literally hundreds – within the course of a given day (McGinn 1998a: 132–133). Thus, here, the contemplative awareness of the presence of God takes on an almost frightening intrusion of the divine into normal human activities and the regular prayer rhythms of the faithful friar.

Put in other terms, Roger's experiences of ecstasy have become visible, physical experiences of raptures, consuming, even disrupting, the life of the friar (and his community). But in addition to these experiences in prayer, the *vita* by Raymond-Peter also reports two other unusual forms of rapturous experiences. The first can best be described as ecstatic-reading or the experience of rapture while reading. Such moments were brought on during Roger's *lectio divina* of Scripture or of the mystical writings of authors like Augustine, Dionysius, Hugh of St. Victor, etc. The second kind of experience took the form of ecstatic-preaching. On occasion, for example, once he had begun to deliver a sermon, Roger seemingly could not stop speaking, so seized was he by the impulse of the Spirit. And in such moments, his auditors had difficulty deciphering the meaning of his words, assuming the message to be profound but hard to grasp (Carozzi 1992: 89–94).

Something similar is observable in the reporting of his visions or *meditationes.* Four such apparitions are mentioned: one of Christ himself, and three others involving his confessor, Roger-Peter. The first, in which Roger is lifted up into the "Temple of the Trinity" by an angel, is the most elaborate. Here, he is privy first to a vision of St. Peter, then of St. Paul, in anticipation of a solemn procession in which Christ himself passes by. Running after the entourage, he eventually catches up with it and asks this regal person who he might be? Without answering the question directly, he assures Roger that he is saved and that his sins of body and soul are forgiven. Finally, he is permitted an instantaneous glance of the Lord: a sight that comforts him for the rest of his days

(Carozzi 95–96).[11] The three other visions all involve Roger's anxiety about his own salvation and that of other friars, some of whom were still living (like Raymond-Peter) as well as others now dead. Joining a theme popular among the Spiritual Franciscans, he is assured that all those who have entered into the order and faithfully followed the Rule will be saved. All of these visionary experiences thus underscore the ecstatic reputation of this Provençal friar and the permeability of the divine realm by means of the vehicle of graced mystical prayer (Carozzi 97–99).

Similar in form to the *dicta* of Giles of Assisi, the sayings of Roger of Provence, however, occasionally lapse, if not into unintelligibility, into grammatical errors – almost as if to convey the impossibility of rendering the ineffable experience of mystical experience in human language. Nevertheless, the sayings of Roger do convey at least one central tenet of mystical prayer that has its echo in the writings of the other Spiritual Franciscans: the critical importance of silence, both inner and outer, in the search for God:

> See, O human being, that the words you have heard are near to silence and so near that they cannot be heard outside of silence, because they can only be heard where they are and because they are within silence. Therefore, enter into your inmost self, within your own silence, so that you may go from your silence into God's and his silence, beyond thought, may say this to you. (Roger of Provence, "Meditationes" 3: 402)[12]

Although we seem to be in a different world from that of Ubertino (who is writing twenty years after Roger), there nevertheless seems to be a close relationship between the *silentium* of the Provençal and the *quies* of the Tuscan. Whereas the meaning of the latter term may be richer and more profound, redolent of a whole set of other connections to Christian and Franciscan history, Roger's insistence on the necessity of inner quiet simply underscores a well-understood pre-requisite for the mystical moment to become a possibility within every frail, earth-bound human being. Without it, the purest *contemplatio* of those who would lead human history into the coming Third Age would never happen.

The second representative figure of the Spiritual Franciscans within the eremitical tradition is John of La Verna. Born John of Fermo in the Marches of Ancona, early in life he fell under the influence of the Franciscan, James of Fallerone, thanks to whom he became a Friar Minor in 1272 (Sabatelli 782–784). Within the context of the escalating tension between the rigorists for poverty and the leadership of the order, it seems that he either requested or was sent by his minister to live at La Verna.[13] He remained there most of the rest of his life until his death in 1322. He was said to be a close friend of Jacopone da Todi to whom, it was alleged, he mystically administered the last sacraments on his deathbed in 1306.

There is ample testimony about the visionary experiences of John of La Verna, all of which is reported in a series of chapters (49–53 and 56–57) in the *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum ejus* (*Actus*: 456–490 and 500–514; FA:ED 3: 529–537 and 540–544). Most of these chapters present elements of the mystical journey which we have encountered before in other authors. For the sake of brevity, we mention only a few salient points from the pericopes.

Chapter 49 is one of the most substantive of the collection (*Actus*: 456–470; FA:ED 3: 529–533). Indeed, it is a rather complex narrative. After extolling the ascetical rigors of the young friar and adding a few biographical details about his conversion and entrance into the order, the author notes that John "was inspired by God to leave the world and those who loved it and to offer the flower of his youth into the arms of the Crucified" (*Actus:* 458, 7; FA:ED 3: 529). Once again, the centrality of the cross emerges as an important theme in the Franciscan version of the mystical journey.

But God alternated an intense sense of divine presence with moments of desolation, desert and absence. Indeed, after a lengthy period of about three years in which the divine presence had been given, the Lord suddenly withdrew that sweetness, causing John one day to wander about in the woods, despondently crying out. This prompted a powerful visionary experience in which he meets Christ along the road. The latter twice ignores his entreaties until, on the third pleading, John is enraptured in the embrace of Jesus Christ and eventually, after kissing his feet and hands, is allowed to drink from "the sacred fountain of the Lord's breast"(*Actus:* 468, 40; FA:ED 3: 532). There follows a kind of schematization of this experience in which the author explains the mystical journey to the reader. John had been allowed to touch, in progressive order, first the feet, then the hands and finally to recline upon the breast of Jesus (as in Ubertino). This is then paralleled with a progression of appropriate responses: tears (feet), thanksgiving (hands) and rapture (breast). Finally, these gradations are paralleled with the three classics stages of the spiritual journey: the way for beginners, the proficient, and the perfect. The last line of the chapter, quoting Psalm 45: 14, summarizes the bedrock contention of these eremitical mystics: "All his glory is from within" (*Actus:* 470, 49; FA:ED 3: 533). God is to be found only by leaving the world and going within oneself.

Returning to a theme we have already seen in Ubertino, Chapters 50–52 both mention the simultaneous gift of the experience of pain as well as the enjoyment of sweetness in the mystical moment, flowing from the One who hung upon the cross (*Actus:* 472–484; FA:ED 3:533–557).

One other chapter bears intense scrutiny for it represents a virtual summation of the most important elements of the mystical journey. Chapter 56 reports a visionary experience as the feast of the Nativity was approaching (*Actus:* 500–504; FA:ED 3: 540–542). Whereas John was anticipating a particular kind of consolation related to a renewed appreciation of the humanity of Jesus, the Lord favored him, instead, with such an intense experience of the love of God for humanity that it was compared to the force of a thousand furnaces which lasted for half a year, its afterglow perduring the length of a whole year. During this incredible ecstasy, John, we are told, was able to see all created reality as if from the perspective of God himself. The description of the mystical path in this testimony, so redolent of language that will become part of the vocabulary of mystical writing, bears extended quotation:

> Afterward, God raised him above every creature so that his soul was absorbed and assumed into the abyss of divinity and illumination, and was buried in the sea of the eternity and infinity of God, to such a degree that he experienced nothing created, nothing formed, nothing finite, nothing imaginable which the human heart could conceive or human tongue could relate. That soul of his was absorbed in that abyss of divinity and in that sea

or type of illumination like a drop of wine absorbed in the depths of the sea. And just as the drop of wine finds nothing in itself but the sea, so that soul saw nothing but God in everything, above everything, within everything and outside everything, and therefore he saw the three Persons in one God and one God in three Persons. (*Actus:* 502–504, 11–14; FA:ED 3: 541)

He concludes with a typically Franciscan peroration:

He discerned that eternal love which, as far as his humanity is concerned, prompted the Son of God to become incarnate in obedience to the Father, and he arrived at ineffable light by way of the incarnation and passion of the Son of God by meditating, by carrying the Cross, and by weeping over the Passion. (*Actus:* 504, 15–16; FA:ED 3: 541)

The Middle Ground Between Historical Consciousness and Eremitical Experience: Jacopone Da Todi

The final Spiritual Franciscan to be treated under the rubric of mysticism is the poet Jacopone da Todi (Peck 1980). Upon the accidental death of his young wife in 1268, Jacopone – probably in his early thirties – took to wandering about as a *bizoccone* (a type of holy fool), leading a life of poverty and penance. Ten years later, in 1278, he entered the order of Friars Minor, the group whose original ideals of detachment from worldly goods and of penance most closely approximated his own temperament. Sympathetic to the cause of the zealots of poverty who were just beginning to emerge in the Marches of Ancona and elsewhere in central Italy, Jacopone, although probably not a part of the original band of friars who came before Pope Celestine V in 1294, considered himself of the same mentality as these fervent brothers and those hidden away in the hermitages of the region. It is thus that, upon the arrest and imprisonment of this saintly hermit-pope, Jacopone and several other Franciscans threw their support to the cause of the Colonna cardinals against a pope of questionable legitimacy, Boniface VIII, signing along with them the famous Longhezza Manifesto (May 9–10, 1297). But, whereas the prelates were forgiven their transgressions, Jacopone was condemned to house arrest in his native Todi. There he remained, embittered but ultimately purified and transformed by the experience, until finally released by Benedict XI in 1305. He died the following year.

An educated layman who knew Latin but who drafted his poetry in the vernacular Italian that was just coming into its own, Jacopone is famous in history for his corpus of 93 *laude*: poetic utterances that convey a particularly fine religious sensibility and intelligence, expressing the whole range of human emotions from disappointment, bitterness and anger to fiery love and affection, to ecstatic jubilation.[14]

The poetry of Jacopone covers ground already marked out by his contemporaries in the order, most especially Ubertino da Casale and John of La Verna. Beyond the individuality of his poetic manner of expression and particular subject matters, Jacopone's poetry actually sharpens the contemplative reflections of these other Franciscan authors, expressing with utter clarity and astonishing elevation what came to be, for him, the most predominant theme of his mystical writing: the role of the experience of

nichil (nothingness, emptiness) in the spiritual journey as the apophatic side of the same experience of *amor* (incredible, abundant, unconditional, boundless love).

In typically Franciscan fashion, Jacopone begins his comments on the spiritual journey with the foundational love shown by God in taking flesh in the incarnation and his willingness to suffer and die for the human race on the cross. *Lauda* 40, for example, has Christ teaching humanity this very lesson:

> I come to teach human beings how to love . . .
> I am the book of life, sealed with the seven seals,
> When I am opened you will find five signs,
> Colored red with blood.
> Ponder them! (Jacopone da Todi, Hughes 141)[15]

Similar to the approach taken by Olivi and Ubertino, the life of Jesus Christ, culminating in his bloody death on the cross, *is* the book of human history in germ, for Jacopone as well, to be read by all who want to truly understand – and experience – the path of union with God. And the key to unlocking this mystery is found in the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ mentioned above. Only by entering into these wounds – indeed, into woundedness itself – will the seeker find and the lover experience love beyond measure. As a result, the contemplation of Christ on the cross will necessarily lead one to embrace, out of love, abjection and suffering. This is the lesson Jacopone drew from his founder, Francis of Assisi, as expressed in *Lauda* 61:

> I have no words for this dark mystery . . . ;
> The disproportionate love of a heart on fire.
> Who can measure the intensity of that fire?
> We only know that the body could not contain it
> And it burst out through the five wounds,
> That all might see that it dwelt therein. (Jacopone da Todi, Hughes 189).[16]

The stigmata, in other words, are the result of the intense meditation of Francis upon the mystery of the cross. So intense was that gaze that the internalization of the love and pain experienced by Christ eventually burst out of his own heart and onto his now cruciform body. Francis, henceforth, would become the model for others to experience the redemptive love of Christ for the human person.

This profound realization was not a simple induction. It was the fruit of the bitter experience of his imprisonment, which forced him to confront his own frailties, sinfulness and egoism; in short, his own woundedness, which could only be healed within the wounds of Christ. Jacopone wrote about this transformation once he was released from prison, having reached a new spiritual maturity (Cusato 2003: 203–229). The dominant image emanating from these poems is that of light: a light revealed to him in the darkest recesses of the prison. Thus, in *Lauda* 91 he writes:

> Light beyond metaphor,
> Why did you deign to come into this darkness? . . .
> Night, I now know, is really day. (265)[17]

This juxtaposition of the images of light and darkness is surely language redolent of the mystical experience. Jacopone's time in prison had brought him the grace of mysticism. And typical of the mystical path, before coming to the Light, Jacopone first had to pass through the darkness, a terrifying experience that he calls the experience of *nichil*.

Jacopone uses the term *"nichil"* in two manners. On one level, the *nichil* is simply the experience of the "desert," the total absence of God on the spiritual journey. Yet, it is in the very heart of this experience of absence that God mysteriously penetrates the darkness of the soul, transforming all into Light, a palpable Presence, an experience of Love. But what would seem to be a positive experience, is paradoxically also a painful one. Jacopone describes it as a deep wounding, when he cries out:

> "Love, Love, You have wounded me . . ."
> "Love, Love, my heart breaks;
> so deep the wound"! (264)[18]

The experience is painful because, as the poet exclaims in *Lauda* 39, this same Light reveals to the soul its truest self: its *nichil*, its nothingness, before the Divine:

> To see my deformities in the mirror of truth,
> The life of Jesus Christ,
> To see them, Lord,
> In that blinding Light! . . .
> In your light, O Lord, I have seen my nothingness,
> My less-than-nothingness.
> The vision compels humility,
> A sense of my worthlessness,
> A consciousness that my will has become Yours . . .
> No one can taste the fruit of this glorious *nichil*
> If not led by the hand of God; of oneself, one can do nothing. (137, 139)[19]

So here we come to the crux of the mystical revelation. If one can do nothing for good except with the help of God, the human person is then confronted by its inherent poverty, its *paupertas*, before God. Poverty is thus not only a material condition; it is a spiritual condition as well. Indeed, it describes an existential reality: *paupertas* identifies what the human person is, in fact, before God. Every human effort, all human willing devoid of God, comes to be marked by the selfish tendencies of the heart. And this is the self that Jacopone learned to hate while in prison. In short, the *nichil* experienced in the prison as absence of God led Jacopone to experience his own *nichil* before God.

The grand trio of *laude*, 90–92 represents the most concentrated and elevated exposition of the mystical path in Jacopone's corpus. Here he expresses most maturely the profound mysteries of the redeeming and purifying love of the cross. The lengthy *Lauda* 90 begins with a plaintive question – "Why do you wound me, cruel charity?" – and then continues to explore the torture which Divine Love brings to the soul since, in response, the soul has become willing to give up everything for love. This bonding now leads the soul into a series of paradoxes, typical of the expression of the mystical relationship:

Once I spoke, now I am mute;
Once I could see, now I am blind.
Oh, the depths of the abyss in which,
Though silent, I now speak; fleeing, I am bound;
Descending, I rise; holding I am held;
Outside, I am within; I pursue and I am pursued. (261)[20]

In the second half of the poem, Jacopone discourses on the love that had first conquered Christ, drawing him down from heaven to earth, where he "leapt up onto the cross to embrace us" (Hughes 263).[21] The human person, in response, must desire to enter into the love and pain of the cross that brings annihilation (*nichil*) of all human willing. This desire for annihilation-in-Christ explodes into *jubilus* (jubilation) in the closing lines of this *lauda* where the word "*amor*" is repeated no fewer than seventy times! But now a new concept is added to the pool of terms that will mark future mystical discourse: the abyss, indeed the abyss of love. *Abissame en amore* – dwelling in the height, depth, and breadth of the bottomless, unfathomable love of God for human beings – lies at the heart of Jacopone's mysticism.

Lauda 91 examines the nature of the perfect union achieved in this abyss and the sinlessness inherent in such a state. In addition, it explores even further the relation between union and annihilation. If the language of mystical death was present in the previous poem, here the concentration is on the *alta nichilitate* (profound nothingness) in which the soul becomes virtually identical with God. In order to reach this hidden God, human powers must cease to function as one is raptured into the annihilation of love (Hughes 272).[22] This language reflects the "dazzling darkness" of the Dionysian tradition.

Lauda 92, the final poem of the trio, is also the shortest. It lays out the three stages of the path towards annihilation. In the first stage, one must utterly renounce one's will and willing. In the second, the intellect must divest itself of all its wisdom since it has no place in the abyss of love. In the third and final stage, the soul experiences both pain and tranquility, that is, it is now at rest (*quies*) (Hughes 274–278).[23]

And thus we have come back to the seminal concept laid out by Ubertino da Casale in which the spiritual journey reaches quietude. All those who follow this path into God, in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth and those of his faithful disciple Francis; all who embrace the experience of *nichil* and leap into the abyss of love will find *quies* in the love of the poor and Crucified Christ.

Notes

To the memory of Paul Lachance, O.F.M.
All English-language citations from the writings of St. Francis and the medieval Franciscan hagiographical sources are from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3 vols., ed R. J. Armstrong, J. A. W. Hellman, and W. J. Short. New York: New City Press, 1999–2001.

 1 *Lectura super Iob* 65 va (as cited in Burr 129, n. 45 for the transcribed Latin).
 2 *Expositio Canticum Canticorum* 1.40 (as cited in McGinn 121, n. 55).

3   See, for example, the *Considerazioni sulle stigmata* which are chapters added to the Italian translation of the *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum ejus,* known as *I Fioretti.*

4   *Arbor vitae*, prol. 2, 8a: Exstasis autem est dicta extra se faciens . . .

5   Ibid.: unde viri spirituales dicuntur ecstatici, id est, extra se facti Deum considerantes in omnibus non semetipsos.

6   Ibid.: in quo intelligitur *ungens* Pater; *unctio* Spiritus Sanctus; *unctus* Christus homo.

7   Ibid., II, 4, 97a; see also RNB 9:3, in FA:ED 1, 70. The Regula non bullata (RNB) is also sometimes referred to, as in FA:ED, as the Early Rule (ER).

8   Ibid. IV, 37, 382b: ut nichil propter te velis: sed solum propter Iesum.

9   Ibid., IV, 37, 389a; but also II, 5, 114ab; IV, 7, 305ab; II, 5, 1151a; II, 7, 127b and III, 3, 149b.

10   The term "custos" refers to one of the elected or delegated assistants of a minister provincial within a Franciscan province during the Middle Ages.

11   Transcribed and translated into French in Carozzi 95–96.

12   Roger of Provence, "Meditationes" 3: 402: Vide, homo, quia verba, quae audisti, proxima sunt silentio et sic proxima, ut extra silentium audiri nequeant, quia audiri non possunt, nisi ubi sunt, et quia infra silentium sunt. Intra igitur intimum tuum, intra silentium proprium, ut de tuo venias ad divinum et eius inexcogitabile silentium hoc tibi loquatur.

13   The date of his arrival at La Verna was probably 1292 on an obedience from the minister general, Raymond Gaufredi (1289–1295), friend of the Spirituals.

14   Jacopone da Todi, *The Lauds* (S. and E. Hughes, trans.). There are two main Italian editions: Franca Ageno (1953) and Franco Mancini (1974). The Hughes' translation follows the Ageno numbering but the Mancini text. Hence, both will be cited.

15   Ibid., *Lauda* 40 (= Hughes 141 = Mancini [27], 74, vv. 36–38, 42–44).

16   Ibid., *Lauda* 61(= Hughes 189 = Mancini [40], 117–118, vv. 125–164).

17   Ibid., *Lauda* 91 (= Hughes 265 = Mancini [92], 295, vv. 17–20 and 25).

18   Ibid., *Lauda* 90 (= Hughes 264 = Mancini[89], 287, v. 243 and 288, vv. 275–276).

19   Ibid., *Lauda* 39 (= Hughes 137 and 139 = Mancini [51], 142–143, vv. 1–5a and 144, vv. 51–54 and 57–60).

20   Ibid., *Lauda* 90 (= Hughes 261 = Mancini [89], 284, vv. 139–146).

21   Ibid., *Lauda* 90 (= Hughes 263 = Mancini [89], 286, v. 215).

22   Ibid., *Lauda* 91 (= Hughes 272 = Mancini [92], 305, v. 341).

23   Ibid., *Lauda* 92 (= Hughes 274–278, esp. 277 = Mancini [90], 289–293, esp. 292, vv. 96–102).

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The Low Countries, the Beguines, and John Ruusbroec

Helen Rolfson, O.S.F.

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in the Low Countries saw the growth of a hitherto unknown sort of mystical movement, distinct from what has been termed "Rhineland mysticism" and worthy of being distinguished in its own right, not subsumed under "Rheno-flemish mysticism." The subject here is preferably called "Flemish mysticism." This movement included laity and clergy, men and women. Its thread winds from the story of the women and men known as beguines and beghards, respectively, to the influence of Cistercians and Augustinians, and eventually culminating in the *Devotio moderna*.

The religious institution known as the beguines and beghards begins in the mists of myth and history. It is an urban phenomenon, largely situated in the Low Countries, but spread throughout Europe. It has its origins in twelfth century Europe and takes on greater definition with the passage of the centuries. The term is applied in general to Catholic women and men who wished to live a devout and upright life in the service of God, without being married and without taking the vows common to those in religious orders – namely poverty, chastity, and obedience, or the monastic vows of obedience, stability and fidelity to a monastic way of life. Instead, they committed themselves to living their dedication as baptized Christians, dwelling either alone in their own homes, or in more or less loose associations or groups. Being considered "neither fish nor fowl," as they did not fit into any recognized canonical structure of the times, they often came under suspicion on the part of the hierarchy, who were ever watchful for the danger of heresy. Increasing efforts to control them, if not to ban them outright, caused considerable tensions.

As with most religious institutions in Christian history, the attraction to living the baptismal commitment in an intense way is common to both men and women. For example, there were intentional communities of men and of women following the Rule of St. Benedict, or that same Rule was deliberately adapted to the feminine situation; Cistercians likewise developed both masculine and feminine communities. The masculine

branch of the beguines is known as the beghards or *beguins*. We simply note here that the branch known as the beghards left little or no architectural or literary remains, disappearing into the darkness of history fairly early.

Beguines

The word "beguine" is etymologically difficult, if not impossible, to trace accurately. Several theories abound in the attempt to unravel this mystery. One is that it derives from the name of a zealous priest from the Liege area, Lambert li Begue (d. 1177) (sometimes thought to imply that he stuttered), who acted as a spiritual father and shepherd of a group of local pious women. A second theory is that it issues from the description of the simple, undyed clothing of beguines, namely *beige*. A third is linked to the collection of alms (from the term *beggen*, to beg), for which some of the beguines, particularly those in Germany, were linked. However, they were generally noted for working for their living as a matter of principle, and not for begging. A fourth theory relates to the name of the Catharist heretics, the Albigensians (i.e., people from Albi) located principally in southern France, but also scattered throughout areas of Italy. Scholars generally consider this latter explanation as possible, as it is not uncommon for groups to inherit what was originally a term of derision.

There were certain affinities between the practices of the orthodox beguines and those of the heretical Cathars, such as their austerities, emphasis on laicity (the lay state), chastity, and an evangelical lifestyle. Some dictionaries have taken the name "beguine" to refer to extraordinarily devout women demonstrating a mystically ecstatic life. Though the annals of the movement have indeed shown some of the members to whom this definition would fit, the sneering dismissal of them as being a group of fanatic ecstatics certainly is inadequate to cover the majority of their peers throughout the centuries. The definition of the term, thus, is not definitive, even though there is rationale for considering one or another source, if not multiple sources. The naming of the heavenly patron of this group followed something of the same pattern: if the Benedictines could call on St. Benedict as their heavenly father under God, and the Augustinians, St. Augustine, some thought that St. Begga must be the heavenly intercessor and protectress designated to watch over the beguines. Claiming this saint, whose life actually antedated the beguines by several centuries, occurred rather late (seventeenth century) in the history of the beguines. The prevalence of images of St. Begga demonstrates this well in extant beguinage art and architecture. Other beloved patrons, besides Our Lady, were Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Elizabeth.

The Dominican scholar L. J. M. Philippen classes the development of the movement in four stages (40–126):

1   Individual devout women who did not join a religious order, but who reject marriage in order to live consecrated to God. This is typical of the earliest period, possibly first noted in the mid-twelfth century. They were referred to in some sources simply as "*mulieres religiosae*."

2   Devout women who lived together in loose connectedness to one another. The very cultured poetess, visionary, and mystic Hadewijch of Antwerp (c. 1250) may be typical of this phase.

3   Devout women who began to live in closely related communities, but who associated with a parish church. These communities flourished from the mid-thirteenth century onwards.

4   Devout women who lived in well-organized communities, whether singly or in groups or "convents" with their own church and pastor. This sort of community, begun in the late thirteenth century, came down to the present day. It is an institution that has perdured to the twenty-first century. There are, however, few if any beguines alive at the present.

The motivation for the very popular rise of the movement is also under some discussion. Some attribute it to its origins in the Crusader epoch and the ensuing problem of the excessive population of women at the time (the *Frauenfrage*), according to which some women could not afford the high dowries required for marriage or for entry into a convent. In this view, life in a *beguinage* (the name for the communities of beguines) accordingly became a preferred solution to the problem. Others consider that it supposedly came about at the instigation of creative rebels among the female population, who were unafraid to confront the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. They thus become heroines of the modern feminist movement. A third supposition is that the beguines came about simply because existing religious orders, particularly the Cistercians, were severely restricting the numbers of entrants into the feminine monasteries. While there is some truth to the allegation, it is not enough to cover the whole situation. When persecution of beguines, particularly by the Inquisition, became more menacing, on account of allegations of heresy, several groups of beguines joined already-existing ecclesiastically accepted groups of religious second or third orders, such as the Franciscans or the Dominicans, or took refuge under the wing of their special spiritual direction. A fourth, and possibly the most cogent, reason for the successful growth of the movement may well be the influence of charismatic spiritual figures among the beguines. A goodly number of them became known through the writings of such notable ecclesiastical figures as Bishop Jacques de Vitry (later bishop of Acre in the Holy Land) who championed the Liege-area beguine Marie of Oignies (1177–1213), or the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpre (1201–1272) who wrote very popular spiritual biographies of some of the beguines noted for the sanctity of their life.

That the movement was principally an urban phenomenon distinguished it from most monasteries of the medieval times. In the fourth period of development of beguine life, in which the architectural buildings called a *curtis* came into being, the beguines built a court-yard on the mystical model of the "enclosed garden" (or *hortus conclusus*) of the Canticle of Canticles 4:12, living out this Marian symbolism in the Middle Ages. Often there would be only one entrance to the enclosure. This served for physical security as well as for assurance of space and quiet enough for the objectives of a life of work and contemplation. The beguines often built against a city wall (such as in Maastricht, in the Netherlands) in order to save money. Their church would stand in the midst of the enclosure, such as one observes in the St. Elizabeth Beguinage in Bruges,

Belgium. The beguines distinguished themselves by the economic difference among their members. Some beguines were indeed patrons of the arts, whereas others were poor and were willing to work under more financially secure beguines for their keep.

The organization of a beguinage typical of Philippen's third and fourth stages as a place to live the "common life" of the works of mercy and of contemplation of God comprised the elected (and paid) superior, to whom the beguines promised obedience with regard to the good order of the complex, the chaplain (likewise paid and chosen by the beguines themselves), the sacristan (paid and elected), the portress (who was a beguine elected and paid for her vigilance in surveillance of the entrance of the complex), the head of the Table of the Holy Ghost (the charitable "food shelf" to care for the poor), and the head of the Infirmary (not only for sick beguines, but also for those of the area who were ill). There was also place for work, such as participation in the cloth industry, for which the Low Countries were so justly famous. There were "convents," that is, residences of more than a few beguines. One of these would serve as a novitiate for beguines awaiting their *steedsel* (full acceptance and establishment into the community), with authorization to take up residence in houses of their own. At that time, the beguine would promise obedience and chastity for as long as she would live in the community. If she were to change her mind and wish to depart, she could carry on a courtship, but not within the walls of the institution. Her eventual wedding could even take place in the beguinage church. Each house was commonly under the patronage of a given mystery of the Christian faith, or of a particular saint. A sort of short-hand grew out of this: a house named for the Eight Beatitudes would have eight beguines in residence there; the Twelve Apostles signaled the residence of twelve beguines, etc.

Each particular beguinage had its own operating Rule, more a document assuring good order of the community than serving as a spiritual document. Under the greater control of local bishops, these Rules became more and more detailed. There was neither a common Rule nor habit for beguines in the earlier days. The garb was not to resemble that of a recognized religious of the day, and was to be simple, unpretentious, and undyed. Later, the stipulation for beguines to have a habit meant that they came to resemble vowed religious. The popularity of the institution was such that almost all major cities of the Low Countries had a beguinage, if not two (such as in Malines and Louvain).

The spirituality of the beguines, shaped by the mysticism of the beguines and other mystics of the Low Countries, featured a strong eucharistic bent, an emphasis on the incarnation and the passion (the crib and the cross), a deep love of Mary as model of the Christian life, the common life of contemplation and action, and piety expressed in devotion. They were devoted to the daily round of the prayer of the church (the office), supplemented eventually by several other devotional prayers.

The beguine movement, including the "mulieres religiosae," has produced several mystics and saintly people: Mechthilde of Magdeburg (1207–1294) (author of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*), Hadewijch of Antwerp (*Visions, Letters, Poems, List of the Perfect*), Marie of Oignies (whose *Life* was written by the bishop Jacques de Vitry and the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpre), Juliana of Mount Cornillon, Yvette of Huy, Christina Mirabilis (The Astonishing) (see Chapters 3, 6, and 20, this volume).

It was in the area around Liege that some of the first known *mulieres religiosae* were recognized. One of these was the very devout Marie of Oignies (1177–1213), born in Nivelles, who, with her husband (with whom she maintained celibacy), lived very ascetically as they cared for lepers of the area. This drew many kindred souls to join in the same care of others. Known for her great charity and self-chastising (even to the point of self-mutilation to master temptation), she drew the attention of such figures as Bishop Jacques of Vitry and the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpre. Bishop Jacques considered her his "spiritual mother" and requested from her some relic that he could carry with him. She gave him permission to have one of her little fingers after her death, which he reverently kept on his person as a relic. Both Vitry and Cantimpre became her biographers, and championed the cause of the beguines in the face of rising condemnations.

Hadewijch, often considered to be of Antwerp, shared her rich experience of the presence of God with women whom she had directed. Some broke with her. Some remained faithful friends. Hadewijch's writings are comprised of *Visions, Letters, Poems in Couplets, and Poems in Stanzas.* Her visionary experience, often related to great liturgical feasts of the church, gave her a sense of deep intimacy with God. But then came the "winter" and a feeling that God had withdrawn that sense of presence. Her poetry laments that feeling of loss in poignant accents. Hadewijch's letters are veritable gems of spiritual direction.

The thirteenth-century Flemish mysticism also produced the great Cistercian mystical writer Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–1268). She began her life with the beguines at the age of seven before joining the Cistercians at ten, eventually becoming the prioress of the Cistercian Monastery of Nazareth near Lier in Brabant. She is justly famed for her vernacular mystical work known as *The Seven Manners of Holy Love.* Her autobiography and the treatise were translated into Latin by her spiritual director. We no longer possess the original autograph. As a result, her work is but one of many examples of vernacular writers known only through the eyes and translation – or even reworking – of an admiring confrere or a spiritual director.

Not much is known about the life of Marguerite Porete, a devout woman who is associated with the Paris area. Some scholars consider her a beguine; others do not. If we accept the first phase outlined by Philippen, it seems she was indeed a *mulier religiosa* in the broad sense. Her claim to fame came largely with the publication of her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. She had this work carefully vetted by reputable theologians of her time, but it did not save her from the inquisitorial process ending in her death at the stake for heresy in 1310. It was no time for a mere lay woman to write such lofty things, and presume to direct others in the same path as she herself had chosen in pursuit of "pure Love." It is true that her vernacular language on love, God, the soul, and the church was daring, and caused the ecclesiastical authorities of her time no little concern. She refused to defend herself during her trial, remaining silent to all questions put to her by the inquisitors. Translations (e.g. one, in England, by Carthusian monks) and editions of the *Mirror* came out anonymously, so that many considered the author to be male. It was only in the twentieth century that the Italian scholar Romana Guarnieri confirmed the actual authorship of the treatise to be Marguerite. The account

of the inquisitorial process in which she was condemned to the stake for heresy has been published by Paul Verdeyen, SJ.

St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) had heard of the beguines and their great veneration of the Eucharist, most likely through Bishop Jacques de Vitry (1160/70–1240), who passed through Perugia on his way to his episcopal see of Acre. Francis was enamored of the reputation of these holy women, and when sending his followers to foreign lands, even wanted to reserve for himself the mission to "Francia" (i.e., the southern Low Countries). The ecclesiastical authorities refused to let Francis depart from Italy, as the dissension in his Order of Lesser Brothers was becoming a problem needing his attention and personal presence. His own spiritual documents amply reflect that eucharistic spirituality and a mysticism of the incarnation and the passion of Christ. If we mention St. Francis here, it is because his spirituality is connected very closely to that of the beguines and of the Blessed John Ruusbroec.

John Ruusbroec

John Ruusbroec (Rusbrockius, Ruysbroeck) (1293–1381), known as *doctor admirabilis,* whose own mother eventually became a beguine in Brussels, was a very important mystical writer from Brabant. Little is known of his early life, not even precisely where he was born or who his father was. His mother was known to be very devout. It is thought that the name "Ruusbroec" likely referred not to a patronymic but to a place name, possibly the hamlet of Ruisbroec near Brussels. We have only the brief biographies by Henry Pomerius and Gerard Saintes, close contemporaries. Educated by Jan Hinckaert, a priest-uncle in Brussels, Ruusbroec trained under him for the priesthood. Ruusbroec spent at least twenty-five years of his long priestly life as a *vicarius* or chaplain for the church of St. Gudule (now the St. Michael Cathedral) of Brussels. The noise of workmen and constant building of a wing of the huge church did not contribute to a prayerful atmosphere. In a bid for a more contemplative form of life, he and two other priests in service at St. Gudule's church decided to remove themselves from the urban setting to form the nucleus of the Monastery of Groenendael (Bois Vert), in the Forest of Soignes, just south of Brussels. One of his biographers blames confreres who constantly sang the Divine Office off-key for this move, but it is far more likely that the construction project that went on for decades was the last straw. When it became necessary for them to adopt a religious rule, they chose that of the Augustinians and affiliated themselves with the Victorines (see Chapter 17, this volume). Contrary to common expectation of mystics, Ruusbroec, who became the first prior of the community, had already written several of his mystical treatises during his priestly life in Brussels; he did not wait until he had the peace and quiet of the woods. An ancient miniature of Ruusbroec depicts him sitting in ecstasy under a tree in the forest, his writing tablets on his lap and at his feet, and a great light emanating from the area. (His confreres, seeing the light, imagined a forest fire had consumed him.) His most famous work, and the one which he himself favored, is *The Spiritual Espousals,* explicating the scriptural text: "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go out to meet Him" to illustrate the comings of the Divine Bridegroom to the faithful soul at the various levels of spiritual progress.

He served as a spiritual director to several people who came to the monastery for his advice and he also carried on a correspondence of such spiritual direction. It is thought that the Dominican confrere of Meister Eckhart, Bl. Johannes Tauler (see Chapter 23, this volume) may have visited the old prior, but a misreading of an old script might have started the rumor. It is certain that Gerard Groote came, in admiration of the venerable monk's teachings, and even translated some of his treatises. His only critique was that Ruusbroec did not seem to express enough "fear" of God. But Ruusbroec also exerted himself, even in his old age, to make a long trek of approximately thirty miles on foot to visit the enclosed Carthusians of Herne, for their spiritual edification, and to explain some of the difficult points of his treatise *The Little Book of Enlightenment.* Their questions had to do with Ruusbroec's description of union with God "without difference," a term that could possibly evoke pantheism (a view that God is identical with creation). This was a period of great upset, politically, socially, and religiously. Ruusbroec felt that there was a great lack of solid spiritual instruction available, and thus his eleven treatises and a collection of letters were written in the vernacular.

There is evidence he knew of the problems surrounding the condemnation of Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and her inquisitorial trial in Paris, though he did not mention her by name, nor did he refer to her fiery fate of being burned at the stake in 1310 (see Chapter 6, this volume). Her treatise was originally written in French. Ruusbroec evidently took the condemnation of Marguerite's work by church authorities as settled matter, as he did the condemnations of Meister Eckhart by the Inquisition (see Chapter 23, this volume). Therefore, his own writings were geared to addressing the two main problems of the time: the prevalence of pantheism and the so-called heresy of the Free Spirit. His writings are remarkable in the restricted space he dedicated to complaint and excoriation of contemporary evils. In the glaring absence of spiritual leadership on the part of the clerical authorities, he wrote with much compassion for the poor lay folk, who were like "sheep without shepherds," to expound the core of Christian doctrine in all its beauty. His other treatises include *The Seven Enclosures, The Realm of Lovers, The Spiritual Tabernacle, The Twelve Beguines, A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness, The Seven Rungs, The Sparkling Stone, The Four Temptations, The Christian Faith* and a volume of his *Letters.* In his writings, he never mentions his own mystical experience, but his biographers have left some vivid images of a man aflame with the love of God. His mystical writings displayed a great intimacy with the Trinity gained through prayer. A second predominant trait was his deep love of the Holy Eucharist. Though not renowned for his eloquence in preaching, he expressed himself very precisely and beautifully in his writings. It is thought that Ruusbroec knew and appreciated the writings of the beguine Hadewijch, and even cited some of her poetry verbatim. He also richly recommended the spirituality of the Cistercians, often citing the mystic St. Bernard (1090–1153) and the Franciscans, particularly Bonaventure (1221–1274), himself a mystic.

One of the most striking aspects of the mysticism of Ruusbroec is his clarity of description, as he outlines what happens to a person who lives in intentional union with God, from the stage of beginner, through that of the one making progress, to that of the proficient. Ruusbroec continually reminds his readers that they are made in the image and likeness of God, and what that glorious fact requires of one who is eager for

union with God. For him, union with God is not something reserved to the very end of the spiritual journey, but was already active in the loving soul. His concern was with human cooperation with the grace of God given through the incarnation. It is a spirituality full of light and joy, and what we might call Christian humanism: human beings, who are made in the image and likeness of God, and destined for ultimate union with God, are given the great model of Christ who took on human flesh and shares human experience. This incorporates the experience of human suffering and discipline, of course. He never uses the term "mysticism," but rather speaks of the "God-contemplating life (*godschouwende leven*)." And yet, it is important to remember that his works are not recipes or formulae geared to attain the mystical state. They are not to be read as guides, arranged in "steps" ascending to God. For those who took him seriously, they provided helpful instructions on what to expect in the soul of one who loves God. Such a one lives a life of "ebb" and "flow" (i.e., going out to the neighbor in loving service and moving into the unity of the Godhead), namely an alternation ideally tending to simultaneity of action and contemplation. In other words, a Christian does not "graduate" from action to contemplation. It was a life modeled on the Holy Trinity, in unity and in multiplicity. In a nutshell, this was his notion of "the common life," a life modeled for humanity by Jesus himself. Ruusbroec's teachings were also warnings of what his readers ought to avoid, and he constantly called on them to remember the life of the fervent ancients and founders of religious life. His readership was mostly, but not exclusively, comprised of those in the religious life, male and female. For example, he wrote for Carthusian monks, for followers of St. Clare of Assisi, for fellow Augustinians, and for Friends of God ("*Gottesfreunde*") in the Rhineland.

The writings of Ruusbroec also deeply inspired the mysticism of the Low Countries in those who followed – for example, Henry Harphius (d. 1477), author of *The Mirror of Perfection*; or Brother John van Leeuwen, the Good Cook, confrere of Ruusbroec, and author of *Van vijf manieren broederlikeker minnen (On five manners of brotherly love)*. We might also recall his influence on the ensuing movement of the *Devotio moderna*, under the leadership of Gerard Groote (1340–1384). The seventeenth-century third-order Carmelite mystical writer Maria Petyt (d. 1677) was also familiar with Ruusbroeckian spiritual teaching and expressed it in her own vernacular autobiography (in Dutch, tinged with French) and other spiritual teachings collected and published by her Augustinian confessor and spiritual director, Michael of St. Augustine.

Devotio Moderna

In the footsteps of Gerard Groote (1340–1384) in Deventer, the reform development known as the *Devotio moderna* produced two branches: the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life (lay, unvowed), as well as the Augustinian monks and nuns of the Windesheim Congregation (vowed). Groote had lived a rather carefree life in his student days in Paris, in which he engaged in practices that were decidedly contrary to the Christian faith, such as necromancy. He underwent a radical conversion and put his own home in Deventer at the disposal of a group of devout women, the initial Sisters of the Common Life. This was the inspiration for similar houses for Brothers. The Ijssel

valley in the Netherlands attests to many of these foundations. One may rightly say that these men and women constituted a reform version of the earlier beguines and beghards. In short, the *Devotio moderna* is not so much a movement as it is the description of the spirituality belonging to the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, and the Augustinian canons and canonesses of the Windesheim Congregation. They are a testament to the founders' conviction that baptism is what constitutes the basis of real Christian commitment and fidelity to God. Only one or two of these communities remain to this day, for example, the Augustinian Sisters of the English Convent in Bruges. There are no extant successors to the Common Life groups. Many of these were eventually absorbed into the communities of the Augustinian Canons and Canonesses.

The Legacy of Flemish Mysticism

The lacunae in some histories of Christian spirituality regarding Flemish mysticism and spirituality may be attributed to several causes. One is the vernacular character of much of the body of literature it represents. Ruusbroec, for example, was thought to be incapable of expressing himself in the learned Latin of the schools, and therefore some concluded he had been taught exclusively by divine inspiration. (We now know that he was perfectly capable of writing Latin.) Second, there is the lay character of the beguines, who were often unschooled in theology and its scholarly terminology, leading most of the ecclesiastical leaders of the day to snub them, if not engage in outright persecution. Third, there was the frightening example of the condemnation of vernacular writings deemed heretical. Marguerite Porete was not the only one to have experienced this. In the Rhineland of the fourteenth century, the Dominican Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) had to defend himself against an extensive list of criticisms of his teachings. Ruusbroec himself did not escape this unscathed. It is ironic that when Jean Gerson (1363–1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris, then the seat of much of the judgment of the orthodoxy in Christian faith, read Ruusbroec's *Spiritual Espousals* in a Latin translation by an Augustinian confrere of Ruusbroec, he criticized it for the very errors that Ruusbroec himself diligently combatted in his native Middle Dutch dialect, namely pantheism and the Free Spirit tendencies of the day. A confrere, and later prior of Groenendael, John of Schoonhoven, wrote to defend the spiritual master, but for all that, Schoonhoven does not seem to have succeeded in exonerating Ruusbroec to Gerson's satisfaction. Fourth, that very vernacular in which such writers as Hadewijch and Ruusbroec wrote made it difficult to cross borders without translation. Since Middle Dutch is the language of comparatively few people, few were able to appreciate Ruusbroec until his writings appeared in Latin, thanks to the careful translation of the Cologne Carthusian, Laurentius Surius (1522–1578) in the sixteenth century.

In our own day, it is thanks to translation work that English-speaking readers are becoming aware of the riches of this great age of mystics and lay spiritual leaders. One can also attest to the resurgence of interest in the inspiration of the beguine movement, and of Flemish spirituality in general, in our day. It was not until 1908 that Ruusbroec was beatified, by Pope St. Pius X. A religious (albeit vowed) congregation in Belgium,

the Sisters of the Convent of Bethlehem, claims to follow the spirituality of a mystical beguine of the sixteenth century, Maria van Hout, author of *The Paradise of the Loving Soul*. The American Carmelite Sisters of Port Tobacco, Maryland, also trace their origins back to a group of beguines who had joined the Carmelite Order before coming to the United States. The beguines themselves, while they perdured into the twenty-first century, are now nearly extinct. Perhaps one may well say that having undergone a virtual eclipse for centuries, the influence of the pioneers of the spirituality and mysticism of the Low Countries were reserved, in the providence of God, for our own times, for their writings and reputation are now evoking new interest, new study, and new admiration.

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Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Henry Suso

Charlotte C. Radler

> People often say to me: "Pray for me." Then I think: Why are you going out? Why do you not remain within yourself and hold on to your own good? After all, you are in essence carrying all truth within you.
>
> <div align="right">Meister Eckhart Pr. 5b, DW 1, 95[1]</div>

On March 27 in 1329, Pope John XXII issued the bull "In agro dominico" ("In the field of the Lord"), posthumously condemning tenets of Dominican Meister Eckhart's thought as "quite evil-sounding and very rash" and as containing "the error and stain of heresy" (Colledge and McGinn 80). Despite the posthumous condemnation that complicated Eckhart's reception, his mysticism has endured and exerted extensive influence. Together with Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) stands as the monumental Dominican thinker of the Middle Ages. He helped shape the contours and content of medieval western mystical theology and, more recently, inspired the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and the theology of Thomas Merton (see Chapter 34, this volume). Eckhart also serves as a helpful bridge-builder in inter-religious dialogue, particularly with Buddhist thought (see Chapter 40, this volume). These examples showcase the breadth and depth of his lasting and robust influence almost seven hundred years after his death.

This article examines the original contribution of Eckhart's luminous mystical vision and traces its bearing on the mystical theologies of Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361) and Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366), two fellow Dominicans. Each of these thinkers developed a vibrant mysticism of the "ground" (*grunt*) and made a profound contribution to the history of Christian mysticism. Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso are often viewed as the nucleus of fourteenth-century German Dominican mysticism. Regarding these three thinkers, Bernard McGinn notes: "In the early fourteenth century the German Dominicans produced three closely related, yet distinct, mystical writers of genius – a true harvest of mysticism" (2005: 240).

All three of our interlocutors enriched the mystical tradition by composing texts within their social worlds and communities, texts that contain incisive theological reflection on the transformative awareness of the presence of God that continue to resonate today. I begin with an analysis of Eckhart and some of his central concepts, and then compare and contrast them with Tauler's and Suso's reception and adaptation of them.

Meister Eckhart

Born c. 1260 in Thuringia in present-day Germany, Eckhart enjoyed a splendid academic, administrative, and clerical career. A prolific writer, he authored biblical commentaries, treatises, and sermons. Nevertheless, in 1325 or 1326, suspicions were raised against Eckhart by fellow Dominicans, probably as a result of a rift within the Dominican order and the increased fear of the heresy of the Free Spirit. An investigation was launched against Eckhart, and he traveled to Avignon to defend himself. He would end his days there, dying probably on January 28, 1328, while awaiting the outcome of his trial. The condemnation of tenets of Eckhart's thought is a painful irony, since the Dominicans were founded precisely to combat heresy through their preaching and teaching.

Eckhart's whole life's work is a testimony to his vocation as both a teacher and a preacher. In his own day, Eckhart commanded respect as a *Lesemeister*, a master of reading as a famous professor at the prestigious University of Paris, and as a *Lebemeister*, a master of life as a beloved preacher and spiritual guide (especially to Beguines and Dominican nuns in Strasbourg and Cologne). Emblematic of the binate nature of Eckhart's calling is the correlation between Latin and vernacular culture in his writings – a "two-way conversation" that McGinn identifies as constitutive of the "new mysticism" of the later Middle Ages (2001: 8) (see Chapter 37, this volume). The new mysticism symbolized a secularization and democratization of spirituality reflected, in part, in the Dominican mendicant vocation to go out into the world to preach, especially in the vernacular. Fearing that its role as a mediator between humanity and divinity might be usurped, the institutional church viewed this new mysticism with a certain suspicion. This ecclesial skepticism would directly affect Eckhart, who wrote in Latin and Middle High German and whose intended audiences were laity and clergy, women and men.

The metaphysics of flow

What Eckhartian concepts garnered so much attention from the church? Eckhart reconfigured a Neoplatonic understanding of reality according to which everything begins and ends with the One, which is the First and Final Cause and in its richness diffuses itself in creation (see Chapter 4, this volume). Eckhart's understanding of the relationship between God and creation is complex, as is evidenced in the intricate metaphysical system that underpins his whole mysticism. McGinn adopts the concept of "metaphysics of flow" as a circular structural metaphor for Eckhart's supple architecture of reality (2001: 71–113). From eternity the One simmers into the Trinity (*bullitio*), which boils

over into creation (*ebullitio*) in a movement from Oneness to multiplicity (*exitus*); in the motion from multitude back into unity (*reditus*), creation surges back through the Trinity and dissolves into the One. As Eckhart indicates in his *Commentary on Genesis*, God is never frozen as One or Three or creation, but in one and the same action God is dialectically One *and* breaking out into the persons of the Trinity *and* flowing forth into creation (*In Gen.I*, LW 1, n. 7, 190–191).

Eckhart's metaphysics of flow maps a space in which humanity and divinity, time and eternity flow continuously in and out of one another, thus obviating a static binary between creation and Creator. Creation is, for Eckhart, both temporal and eternal in nature, and unitary and Trinitarian in structure. Eckhart conceptualized humanity as having two intersecting realities, where temporal, fleeting human autonomy is grounded in the divine cause (*In Gen.II*, LW 1, n. 35, 502; *In sap.*, LW 2, nn. 21–22, 342–343). Reiner Schürmann characterizes this dual nature as a "wandering identity" – that is, the temporal search for unity (not yet) and the eternally perfect identity with God (already now and always) (1978: xiii–xiv, 47). Creation solely exists in an evanescent diaspora existence, for its ephemeral existence is rooted in and sustained by divine existence. Eckhart believed that the idea of true human autonomy is illusory because only God is and has being. Since creation does not possess its own ontological foundation and is nothing in itself, it only has being through its relationship with God (*In Gen.II*, LW 1, n. 25, 494–496). Conveying the fluid reality of the metaphysics of flow, Eckhart tirelessly plays with different perspectives of nothing and nothingness. Nothing is a multivalent term that indicates both God's vertiginous transcendent nothingness, which saturates everything and which the human being simultaneously is and strives to become through detachment, as well as the vacuous nothingness of created autonomous existence apart from God (Pr. 71, DW 3, 211–212, 219–220, 226–227).

Eckhart's notion of the spark in the soul connotes the converging natures of the human being. Although the idea of a spark in the soul was not novel in the history of Christianity, Eckhart's bold configuration rendered it unique. He conceived of an uncreated spark that constitutes the true, eternal core of the soul where God resides and where the soul resides in God, and that has more width than the sky or anything imaginable (Pr. 42, DW 2, 301–302). The spark is essential in the mystical journey back to union with God, as the spark of the soul always strives for simplicity and purity. In his German Sermon 2, Eckhart depicts this spark: "I have also often said that there is a power in the soul that touches neither time nor flesh . . . In this power God is always greening and blossoming in all the joy and in all the honor that he is in himself. That is such a hearty and incomprehensibly great joy that no one can fully talk about it" (Pr. 2, DW 1, 32). At the end of the sermon, Eckhart radicalizes his claims about the spark. He contends that it is so purely One that not even God as Trinity can gaze into it, for then God would have to relinquish all divine persons and names (Ibid., 43–44).

Saying and unsaying, knowing and unknowing: Eckhart's apophatic theology

Throughout his writings, Eckhart labored to find the most suitable words to describe God (*kataphatic* or positive theology), but concluded that it is more fitting to negate

or unsay all names and be silent (*apophatic* or negative theology). Eckhart's discourse about God rested on a sophisticated performance of attribution where he creatively employed names for the divine *and* subjected them to an unyielding process of apophasis. He cultivated a linguistic and methodological ambiguity that manifested the dialectical, circular process of saying and unsaying. For Eckhart, naming God (and self) was organically linked to the apophatic practice of detachment (*abegescheidenheit*). Detachment and apophasis imply the removal and cutting away of all that is extraneous and particular for the sake of what is truly real.

As nouns, predicates, and adjectives are rooted in fragmented human experience, they reify what is infinite, circumscribe what is boundless, and rupture what is unified. Eckhart maintained that it is ultimately more apposite to negate all names for God, since they disclose what God is not rather than what God is (Pr. 20a, DW 1, 330). Language, moreover, contributes to the human tendency to construe its own idols or golden calves based on its own desires, needs, and fears. These idols constitute the basis for a mercantile spirituality that characterizes much of religiosity and devotion, and which Eckhart vigilantly tried to dismantle, since it prevents true self-discovery and discovery of God.

While Eckhart privileged apophatic theology over kataphatic theology, in the end he problematized both since even negations – in as much as they are dependent on affirmations – remain within the constrictive playing field of limited and particular language, knowledge, and existence (*In Ex.*, LW 2, n. 181, 155). For Eckhart, the negation of the negation is the purest affirmation of the most unitary One, the transparent fullness and marrow of all existence (*In Sap.*, LW 2, nn. 144–148, 154–155, 482–486, 489–491). Eckhart inscribes the names "One" and "I Am Who I Am" from Exodus 3:14 as negations of the negation, since they break open the parameters of affirmation and negation and signify both the transcendence and immanence of the divine (Ibid., n. 154, 489–490; *In Ex.*, LW 2, nn. 14–16, 20–22).

Nonetheless, since God is ultimately "unworded," Eckhart counseled his audience to be silent. Silence is not a despondent act of surrender, but a pure affirmation of ultimate reality. God speaks God's silent, hidden Word into the quiet ground of the soul, where no creatures or images or even a sense of self may enter. In the unfathomable depths of the soul's ground, which coincides with the divine ground, the still soul transfigures its knowing into over-formed knowing (Pr. 102, DW 4, 420). Here, the soul is unknown to itself and unknows with God's unknowing, possessing only a learned ignorance, as the soul abandons particularized knowing and assumes a transformed super-intellectual form of knowing in union (Pr. 103, DW 4, 478). Less than half a century later, mystic Nicholas of Cusa (see Chapter 26, this volume) would adopt and famously develop the notion of learned ignorance.

Detachment

In the metaphysics of flow, the circular tide constitutes a continuous whole as the ebb out into the world of multiplicity is connected to the flow back into unity. Swirling back into the One, the soul dismantles a falsely constructed self and god, becomes nothing

like God is nothing, and disposes of external and internal attachments through detachment. Eckhart diagnosed the attachment to the autonomous self and the deity constructed by the autonomous self as the most nefarious attachments and the root cause of all other attachments. Humanity's obsequious relationship to the illusion of its own autonomy results in a myopic self-centeredness and alienation from God, other human beings, and the rest of creation. Detachment awakens the human being to its divine reality and discloses the wondrous truth that all things are in all, interconnected, and One.

In German Sermon 1, Eckhart criticized mercantile spirituality by exploring the biblical story of Jesus' discontent with the commerce in the temple (Pr. 1, DW 1, 4–6, 9–10). The merchants in the temple are constantly seeking something in their unremitting bargaining process with God, whether external awards or inner comfort. Eckhart makes clear that these merchants are decent people who try their very best to please God in ways that seem honorable to them. With industrious determination, they perform good works and devotional practices in the hopes that God might give them something in return. This seemingly dutiful piety is, Eckhart declares, in reality nothing but a superficial, surrogate devotion, for these merchants expect daily life based on the circle of economy to be mirrored in the human–divine relationship. However, the human being must empty her soul, like Jesus emptied the temple.

In German Sermon 16b, Eckhart expanded his critique of mercantile spirituality: "Some people want to see God with their own eyes, just as they see a cow, and they want to love God just as they love a cow. You love it because of the milk and because of the cheese and because of the usefulness for you. This is how all the people act who love God because of external riches or because of internal consolation; and they do not love God rightly, but they love their own use" (Pr. 16b, DW 1, 274). Detachment deposes the fabricated false self and the fabricated false "god" (both equally illusionary), and it destabilizes a mercantile spirituality's carefully measured exchange of devotional activities and spiritual rewards. Eckhart's configuration of detachment thus served as an important meta-critique of an unreflective religiosity.

For Eckhart, detachment is so transformative that it can achieve everything imaginable and unimaginable. His description of the detached life may well have baffled his audience: "[To be] empty, [to be] poor, to have nothing, to be pure, changes nature; purity makes water climb uphill" (*BgT*, DW 5, 29). If a person realizes true detachment and becomes wholly centered in God, she could step on a stone and it would be a more divine work than to take the body of Christ (*RdU*, DW 5, 200–201). Detachment forms a point of convergence between God and the human being: it constitutes the ground for God's existence, and, yet, it is also the ground for the possible equality and fusion of identities between God and the human being.

Living without a why: Eckhart's apophatic ethics

A striking feature of Eckhart's mysticism is its lack of concrete stages and detailed ethical direction. He feared that they might become attachments or "ways" that obfuscate God. Amy Hollywood (193) characterizes Eckhart's non-prescriptive ethics as

an "apophatic ethics," which is expressed in Eckhart's notion of living and working "without a why" (*sunder/âne warumbe*), a concept intimately linked to detachment. For Eckhart, "waylessness" bears "whylessness" that bristles with works of love. It is out of the inner ground that the human being performs works without a why, not for the sake of something but for the sake of nothing, which is the essence of all. The wayless and whyless person experiences true freedom and lives in what Schürmann has termed "wandering joy" (xiv). Eckhart described this wayless and whyless effervescent joyfulness in German sermon 5b:

> So long as you work all your works from the outside for the sake of the kingdom of heaven or for God's sake or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, you are truly wrong . . . Whoever seeks God in ways, he takes the ways and loses God, who is hidden in ways. But whoever seeks God without ways, takes him as he is in himself . . . Whoever continuously for a thousand years asks life: "Why are you living?" If it would answer, it would only say: "I live because I live." That is because life lives out of its own ground and streams forth from its own; therefore it lives without a why in that it is living its self. (Pr. 5b, DW 1, 90–92)

Consistent with the Dominican vocation of a *vita mixta*, Eckhart whittled a this-worldly mysticism that posited a living union between active and contemplative life. For Eckhart, a detached person with a quiet mind has God wherever he or she may be, be it in the bustling streets or in the stillness of a monk's cell (*RdU*, DW 5, 203). Rather than being a special state, Eckhart asserted that union with God is intrinsic to quotidian life. His this-worldliness and union between action and contemplation are manifest in German Sermon 86. This sermon subverts the prevailing reading of the Mary and Martha narrative (Lk. 10:38–42; Jn. 12:1–8), which privileges Mary as representing the contemplative life over Martha as symbolizing the active life. Eckhart's remarkable interpretation of the Mary and Martha story discloses the liberation to, not from, quotidian activities. Perfectly detached and ebulliently acting out of a "well-exercised ground," Martha exemplifies true spiritual maturity as she serves Christ and actually practices life (Pr. 86, DW 3, 481–483, 491). Since she remains established in her ground, her everyday activity does not impede her, but brings her blessedness and delight. Conversely, too absorbed by a desire to satisfy her soul, Mary forgoes any activity and sits blissfully at Christ's feet (481). Unlike much of the preceding tradition (e.g., Augustine), which had contended that Martha ultimately metamorphoses into Mary, Eckhart reconfigured a paradigm whereby Mary ultimately becomes Mary, as she gains substantial life-experience and becomes who she always was through detachment and activity without a why (491–492).

The birth of the Son in the soul

Eckhart's notions of detachment and living without a why are inseparably linked to his concept of the birth of the Son in the soul. Although the mystical motif of God's birth in the soul can be found since late antiquity in the Christian tradition (e.g., Origen),

Eckhart was original in terms of giving birthing a fundamental position in his thought. According to German Sermon 2, the soul becomes virginal and receptive through detachment. Paradoxically, it is only as a virgin that the soul can conceive and become a fruitful wife. As virgin-wife, the soul gives birth to the Son in the same ground where the Father gives birth to the Son and is abounding lavishly in everyday life (Pr. 2, DW 1, 30–31).

Just as creation encompasses both eternal and temporal dimensions, the birthing process does so as it extends through time and eternity (Pr. 101, DW 4, 335). Eternally, the Father births without ceasing, and this same birth brims into the uncreated core of the human being; temporally, the Father births all created things that preexisted in the One into time and space. For the Dominican Master, the Son is born in the spark of the soul and this soul, becoming the Son Himself, gives birth back into the heart of the Father. The soul bears the Son from and in the same ground where the Father gives birth to the Son. The birthing process envelops the detached soul into the billowing life of the Trinity and signifies a fusion of identities (Pr. 6, DW 1, 109–110).

One in the One eternally

For Eckhart, the end is the beginning and all of reality coincides in the One. Eckhart's notion of union connotes the dialectic between the soul's eternally perfect identity with God and the process of detachment, living without a why, birthing, and breaking through towards the reality of this union. Although previous Christian mystics had grappled to articulate the nature of union between God and the human being, most of them insisted that *some* distinction – however infinitesimal – remains between God and the human being. Many Christian mystics had conceived their understanding of union based on 1 Corinthians 6:17 ("Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him"). Union had been construed in terms of a spiritual union of love and will. Eckhart, however, stretched the categories of union and mystical life. He maintained that the perfectly detached human being dissipates in the divine abyss and unites *indistinctly* with God. Distinct names and pronouns, emblematic of a false reality of separateness, are erased in an abyss of oneness. Eckhart counseled his audience to "sink out of your yourness and dissolve into his hisness and your 'yours' and his 'his' should become one 'mine' so wholly that you with him understand eternally his unbecome 'isness' and unnamable nothingness" (Pr. 83, DW 3, 443).

Eckhart also famously conveyed his concept of indistinct union in German Sermon 12, where his notion of the fusion of identities between God and the human being is inscribed in the metaphor of the eye: "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye and one seeing, one knowing and one loving" (Pr. 12, DW 1, 201). The metaphor of the eye forcefully expresses the disintegration of the God-creature and self-other distinctions. However, since union constitutes a dialectical and continuous process rather than static identity, Eckhart's mysticism proposes a naked intimacy and transparency between human and divine, while safeguarding alterity and distinction. This dialectical cadence is never-ceasing, as reality springs forth in the metaphysics of flow evermore.

Johannes Tauler

Johannes Tauler was born c. 1300 in Strasbourg, an important center of female piety with seven convents of Dominican nuns and many beguine houses (see Chapter 22, this volume). Eckhart had spent some seminal years there as a special vicar for the Dominican Master General, during which he deepened his vernacular preaching. In 1315, Tauler joined the Dominican order in Strasbourg. Faithful to the Dominican vocation, he became a beloved preacher famous for his sermons, nearly eighty of which survive. He self-identified as a *Lebemeister* rather than as an academic *Lesemeister*, dedicating his life to preaching, spiritual direction, and pastoral care, especially for the Dominican nuns and Beguines.

Throughout his life, he encountered the "Friends of God," whom he viewed as true *Lebemeister* since they lived exemplary devout lives. He became deeply involved in this spiritual renewal movement for both clergy and laity that arose in the 1330s and 1340s in the Rhineland. It took as a catalyst the mystical preaching and teaching of our three Dominicans, received its institutional structure from the wealthy layperson Rulman Merswin (the founder of their religious community house, the Green Isle, in Strasbourg), and produced a body of vernacular texts and letters. The spirituality of the "Friends of God" was characterized by a democratization and secularization of mysticism as well as a this-worldliness, assimilating action and contemplation. It centered on the imitation of Christ and true experiences of God, and impressed the importance of such spiritual practices as detachment, pure works of love, moderate asceticism, patient acceptance of suffering and dereliction, and deep humility (frequently in opposition to the prideful speculation of learned theologians). The well-known *Masterbook* – about the dramatic spiritual conversion of a famous preacher and theologian by a simple layperson, composed in the Green Isle community and circulated among the "Friends of God" – was viewed by many as an account of Tauler's own conversion. However, later historians have demonstrated that the main character is a literary construct disconnected from the historical Tauler. Tauler also exerted great influence on Martin Luther (see Chapter 27, this volume), who adopted and reinterpreted facets of Tauler's thought.

The web of converging life paths and textual influences that bind Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso together is complex and tangled. The fact that Tauler only once mentioned Eckhart by name in his writings (V 64 [347.9–14]) and frequently camouflaged his appropriation of Eckhart's ideas should not be viewed as a critical dissociation from the Meister's theology, but must rather be seen within the complicated context of the process against Eckhart and investigation of his followers.[2] For Tauler, Eckhart would always remain the "great noble master" (V 56 [263.1]) and a "loving master," who "spoke out of eternity, but you understood him in a temporal way" (V 15 [69.26–28]). Although Tauler was never an actual student of Eckhart in Cologne, he may have encountered Eckhart during Eckhart's time as a preacher and instructor for the Dominican brethren in Strasbourg. During a trip to Cologne in 1339, he also may have come in contact with Eckhart's writings. He, moreover, possessed a copy of Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae* (19–21, 37; Ruh 479–481). It is evident that Tauler was familiar with Eckhart's

writings and appropriated much of his thought with profound appreciation and understanding, while simultaneously forging his own independent mystical theology.

Similar to Eckhart and Suso, Tauler was deeply influenced by Neoplatonic thought and outlined a mysticism of the "ground." He posited that the divine nature is absolutely One and conceived of a circular reality, overflowing from the divine ground and returning to it (V 1 [8.16–24]; V 61 [331.32–39]). Relatedly, he presumed an ontological dependence of the human being on God, the fullness of existence (V 67 [365. 18–26]). According to Tauler, the relationship between humanity and divinity pivots on the polyvalent concept of nothingness, which signifies both the abysmal difference between creation and Creator as well as the immeasurable possibility of union. Whereas Eckhart had emphasized the not-yet and always reality of indistinct union, Tauler viewed union as the potential corollary of a transformative process.

This important difference stemmed from divergent understandings of ontology and anthropology. While Eckhart argued that two intersecting realities – created and uncreated – coinhere in the human being, Tauler refrained from making a similar assertion, perhaps since this Eckhartian idea had been censored. This disparity emerged in Tauler's discussion of nothingness and the verging created and uncreated abysses (*grunt*, *abgrunt*; although many of Tauler's writings treat *grunt* and *abgrunt* as synonymous, at times *abgrunt* seems to denote a deeper incomprehensibility and hiddenness [McGinn 2005: 262–263]). Where Eckhart had contended that the human being possesses concurrently a created nothingness that hinders oneness and an uncreated nothingness that is that very oneness, Tauler maintained that the human being has only a created nothingness that is buttressed by divine uncreated nothingness (V 41 [175.34– 176.5]; V 45 [201.1–7]). In Tauler's ontology, consequently, there is not the same dialectical fluidity of a peregrine identity as in Eckhart's thought, but more of a "hierarchical" structure that demands a leap through detachment from the human being's abysmal nothingness into the divine abysmal nothingness. Tauler's anthropology is manifested in his ostensibly mercurial notions of mystical union, alternately seeming to claim indistinct union between God and the human being and a distinct union that may be perceived by the detached human being as indistinct.

In his anthropological locutions, Tauler spoke of an eternal inclination back to God, *gemuete* (inclination/mind), which is the uppermost and innermost part of the soul where all the faculties of the mind and soul convene; it is also designated as the ground of the soul (V 64 [348.24–25, 350.9–19]; V 56 [262.4–19]; V 77 [416.1–5]). It "always beholds and loves and enjoys God without cease . . . It knows itself as God in God, and still it is created" (V 64 [350.16–19]). The *gemuete* summons the human being towards its uncreated origin, the divine ground (V 64 [350.20–29]).

Similar to Eckhart and Suso, Tauler adopted both an apophatic discourse and an anthropological practice of detachment. Discursively he operated within the Dionysian ambit of negative theology, where speaking is negation or silence, knowing is unknowing, and the encounter with the hidden and ineffable God is encompassed by a divine darkness that is brimful with light (V 56 [263.19–264.5]; V. 28 [117.30–36]; V 54 [249.27–32, 252.16–19]; V 60 [277.20–278.19]; V 74 [400.6–13, 20–23, 401.20– 32]). Tauler emphasized the necessity of detachment and releasement (*gelassenheit*), for God only enters into an empty and receptive soul that has detached from everything

that is not purely God (V 23 [91.28–92.11]; V 74 [400.23–32]). Tauler claimed that the rim of the created abyss becomes the point of exodus from a fallacious "I" into the divine abyss as the soul unknows itself (V 26 [108.12–17, 109.20–23]). The less of "you" – with its illusory self-sufficiency, fastidious need to control and rule, and deformed, self-serving love and will – that is guarded, the more of God is received in the void as created nothingness flows into uncreated nothingness and dissipates (V 41 [176.6–11]). Tauler focused mainly on dismantling the supercilious "I" and did not, in the way that Eckhart and Suso did, highlight the nexus between the false, idolatrous "I" and the false, idolatrous "god."

Christocentric like Eckhart and Suso, Tauler maintained that Jesus' historical life and suffering form exemplars of detachment to be imitated (*imitatio Christi* and *imitatio passionis*) (V 45 [199.20–25, 29–32] V 55 [258.5–8]; V 71 [388.6–10]). Devoutly, like poor Lazarus before the door of the rich man, the human being should knock on the open, macerated heart and body of Jesus, mindful of his own abysmal poverty (V 60a [284.17–30]), that is, both his created paucity and the uncreated bottomless nothingness to which he has been invited. In and through Jesus' wounded heart – signifying his infinite love for humanity – the abyss of the human soul is beckoned into union in the divine abyss since "Abyss cries out to abyss" (Ps. 41:8; V 41 [176.6–11]; V 45 [201.1–7]; V 71 [388.17–25]; Wyser 1958: 224; Wrede 1974: 83).

Similar to Eckhart's democratization of mysticism, Tauler refused to privilege certain vocations and devotional practices as ways to God, insisting that the journey to God is a wayless and whyless wayfaring through a wild desert (V 11 [54.28–55.5]; V 60 [277.31–278.5]). The detached person is so drunk with love that she capitulates her autonomous ability to know, love, and work, as God alone knows, loves, and works in her (V 55 [257.30–258.3]; V 54 [251.9–24]). The inner purity and freedom of the detached human being determines the quality of her outer works, ensuring that "action will also be godlike" (V 39 [157.13]) and extirpating mercantilism and quietism (V 60e [309.28–310.5]; V 55 [255.4–9]). The detached person works with nothing but joy and an expansive, universal love that bristles with surfeit from the inner ground (V 34 [318.9–11]).

Tauler's theology also expressed the "this-worldliness" and democratization of Eckhart's thought. In V 42, he tells the story of a simple peasant, who was one of the most dedicated "Friends of God." This peasant asked God if he should forgo his work to sit and pray in church, but God replied that he should honor Christ's most precious blood by continuing to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow (V 42 [179.20–24]). In Tauler's writings, there is living union between action and contemplation, since for him only the true friends of God imitate Christ and actualize humanity's likeness with God by integrating inner prayer and action (V 56 [264.9–15]; Mieth 235–311; Clark 45). Although Tauler did not embrace the Eckhartian subversion of the Mary and Martha narrative, he did maintain that Mary was not praised because of her still contemplation. Martha was, moreover, not reprimanded for her works, because they were holy and good, but she was rebuked because of her solicitude since true works of love are born out of inner peace (V 42 [178.23–24]).

Similar to Eckhart, Tauler promoted the notion of birthing, but he related birthing to his pivotal concepts of abyss and ground. He also incorporated the eternal process

of birthing into Jesus' historical life to a greater extent than Eckhart since the detached person diffuses into the Son both in suffering and in inner-Trinitarian processions. Imitating and internalizing Christ's kenotic life and path from Gethsemane to the Cross on Calvary in a process of self-annihilation, the Father calls the human being into the divine ground (V 67 [371.12–28]). In this plummetless depth, the released human being is absorbed into the life of the Trinity and the birth of the Son. As the Son is born eternally from the Father and flows back into the Father, so is the human being also born anew from the Father in the Son and flows back into the Father and becomes one with Him (V 29 [301.19–29]).

Unlike Eckhart, Tauler mapped a mystical itinerary to God constituted by the stages ecstatic joy, inner desolation, and union. These stages form a progressive journey and express different modes of God's presence and absence: first, an inward, virtuous life leads the human being to give herself wholly over to God and break out in ecstatic jubilation; second, God's withdrawal propels the human being to "night-work" and to wander on a "very wild path, totally dark and foreign" that causes spiritual poverty, anguish, and melancholy, as well as a deep sense of abandonment; and third, healing of spiritual wounds and transformation through grace yields a union in which the human being becomes God-formed (V 39 [159.29–162.13]; V 41 [175.16–23] V 63 [345.9–19]; Haas 1995: 98–102). Tauler beautifully depicted this last juncture:

> The faculties [of the soul] cannot reach into this ground even within a thousand miles of it . . . [I]t is a bottomless abyss, which hovers in itself without ground, just as waters undulate and billow. Now, they sink into the abyss and it seems like there is no more water, yet, soon thereafter it rushes back out as if it wished to drown everything . . . In this is God's actual dwelling place, where God lives more truly than in heaven or in all creatures. Whoever could reach in here, would truly find God there and find himself united in God, for God never parts from him. God would be present to him, and eternity is experienced and savored here. (V 61 [331.1–11])

Tauler articulated an ambiguous stance on union due to his own understanding of anthropology and ontology as well as the potentially complicated implications of Eckhart's notion of indistinct union. On the one hand, in some sermons Tauler employed language that connotes oneness and identity (V 56 [263.7–18]; V 32 [120.20–24]). Through perfect annihilation, the creature loses itself as the created abyss melts and flows into the uncreated abyss, leaving only "one nothing in the other nothing" (V 45 [201.1–7]). Tauler's illustration of union in V 7 is reminiscent of Eckhart's notion of indistinct union: "Thus the spirit is sunk in God in divine unity so that it loses all distinction. Everything that is brought there, that is, humility, ideas, and its very self, loses its name and is a pure, silent, secret unity without any distinction" (V 7 [33.25–28]). On the other hand, in some sermons Tauler indicated that some ontological distinction remains between God and the human being in union although human consciousness subjectively might be aware of nothing but indistinction (V 32 [121.23–30]). For example, in V 37 Tauler maintains that God and the soul are one through grace and not through nature, and were the united soul to step outside itself and gaze upon itself, it would perceive God (V 37 [146.21–147.2]).

How are we then to understand Tauler's coterminous constructs of union? Some of the ambiguity regarding his notion of union might abate if we consider Tauler's teaching on nothingness, abyss, and his departure from Eckhart's anthropological position of two intersecting natures. A broader pattern then emerges that suggests that, while the ephemeral self and its self-awareness unbecome in union, the ontological core of the created ground subsists. Nevertheless, we must recognize that Tauler is not a systematic theologian and may have even molded a deliberately unsettled notion of union in the aftermath of the process against Eckhart.

Henry Suso

Born c. 1295 in Constance, Henry Suso became one of the most widely read mystics in the late Middle Ages. He joined the Dominicans in Constance at the age of thirteen, where he received his preparatory education. It was during his further education in philosophy and theology at the Dominican house in Strasbourg and at the Dominican *studium generale* in Cologne that Suso is said to have encountered Tauler and Eckhart. The ripples of the conflict around Eckhart did not leave Suso untouched. Suspicion and humiliating investigations against followers of Eckhart plagued the Dominican province of Teutonia (Suso vividly recounted his own experience in his *Life of the Servant* [hereafter *Life* or *L.*] 23 [66.3–70.15]).[3] His *Little Book of Truth* (hereafter *LBT*), a defense of Eckhart's theology dated to c. 1329, and an early version of the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* (hereafter *LBEW*) were both censured by fellow Dominicans for being heretical. Though – like Eckhart – he was not personally condemned as a heretic, his promising academic career was disrupted. Similar to Tauler, Suso dedicated his life to that of a *Lebemeister*, consigning it to preaching, inner devotion, and spiritual direction, especially of beguines and Dominican nuns. He established a close spiritual friendship with Elsbeth Stagel, a sister at the acclaimed Dominican convent Töß and his spiritual daughter, to whom he wrote letters containing instructions on a vast array of spiritual topics (Stagel compiled twenty-eight of his letters into the *Great Book of Letters* and Suso collected eleven of these into the *Little Book of Letters* [hereafter *LBL*]). Their friendship and collaboration on Suso's *Life* offer further evidence of the continuous cooperation between men and women that characterized the new mysticism of the later Middle Ages. Like Tauler, Suso was linked to the "Friends of God."

Suso composed works in both Middle High German and Latin. His preferred form of discourse is dialogic narrative, probably inspired by Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (Stirnimann 214–229; Clark 62). Suso's work *Horologium Sapientiae* (*The Clock of Wisdom*; hereafter *Horologium* or *Hor.*)[4] is an expanded Latin version of his German *LBEW*. It was such a beloved spiritual writing in the late Middle Ages that only Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* exceeds it in the number of known manuscripts (Haas 1979: 296; 1995: 23–24; Ruh 441–442). Suso also compiled and edited his vernacular writings (*Life*, *LBEW*, *LBT*, and *LBL*) into a work named *The Exemplar* as they represent paradigms of mystical transformation.

Suso's mysticism of the ground adopted the Neoplatonic and Eckhartian circular metaphysical framework of emanation of the Trinity and creation from the ground

of the Godhead (in the process of which creation receives its autonomous being and its constructed god) and their return to its hidden depth, capturing time and eternity as a continuous motion (*L.* 51 [178.6–14]; 53 [193.23–26]; *LBT* 2 [330.3–14]; 3 [331.16–332.12)]). In the "silent, hovering darkness" of the "abyss without ground," all multiplicity, even the Trinity, has its origin and end as the Trinity "sinks into its oneness, and all multiplicity is freed of its self" (*LBT* 2 [330.10–14]). Similar to Eckhart and Tauler, Suso posited that the human being possesses a created nothingness that aims to unite with the uncreated, transcendent nothingness of the divine. However, like Tauler, Suso's anthropology obviated the idea of the human being's dual intersecting ontological realities, proffering a "hierarchical" rather than a dialectical relationship between the creature and its primal origin (*LBT* 3 [331.16–23]). Congruous with Eckhart and Tauler, Suso appropriated an apophatic anthropology and a Dionysian apophatic discourse. In Suso's mystical theology, we encounter a performance of attribution comparable to Eckhart's thought: Suso strove to speak aptly about God and employed language flush with images, but he also recognized language's inability to capture the divine and the discursive fissure between finite and infinite since God, the "the nameless Nothingness," is above all images, thought, intellect, and words (*L.* 50 [171.6–11]; 52 [187.11]).

In developing a richly textured and multifaceted mysticism, Suso wove together speculative, nuptial, and courtly forms of mysticism with a spiritual philosophy and a mysticism that centers on Christ's passion. McGinn argues, "none was more representative of the many strands of mysticism of the century than this Dominican friar" (2005: 195). In *Horologium*, Suso crafts a beautiful fusion of bridal and courtly mysticism that orbits around his relationship with Eternal Wisdom, a personification of the suffering Christ as well as an instantiation of a female Sophia both betrothed to the detached soul (*Hor.* Prol. [366.16–19]). Barbara Newman advises the reader to see Eternal Wisdom with a "theological double vision: s/he is at once the Creatrix of the Old Testament and the Redeemer of the New, at once glorified and crucified, divine and human, woman and man" (2002: 7). Lady Wisdom, a skillful lover and "the goddess of all beauty," also seductively metamorphoses from a sweet young girl to a beautiful, proud young man with equally protean characteristics (*Hor.* I.1 [379.26–380.1]; I.4 [400.17]; I.6 [418.14–419.4, 425.6–20]; *L.* 3 [13.26–14.25]). This fluid and ambiguous gendering signals a refusal to reify Wisdom and is at the same time indicative of a general gender fluidity that marks medieval thought and culture (see Chapter 3, this volume).

Although the mystical theologies of our three Dominicans are all highly Christological in nature, Suso placed a greater emphasis on Christ's bodily incarnation and his incommensurable suffering humanity as well as on the *imitatio passionis*, which is a true science that brings pure joy and knowledge (*LBEW* 2 [204.3–207.21]; 14 [254.7–259.6]; *Hor.* I.3 [393.26–29]; I.14 [495.25–496.8]; *L.* 21 [62.1–5]). The dynamic quality of the *meditatio* and *imitatio passionis* is evident in Suso's "Hundred Meditations," which are vivid meditations that allow for the passion in all its stations to break through into the participant's life and prompt a kenotic following of Christ (*LBEW* [314–322)]; Haas 1995: 125–177). In the *LBEW*, eternal Wisdom instructs the servant: "No one can reach the divine heights or the unusual sweetness without first being drawn through the image of my human bitterness . . . My humanity is the way

that one walks, my suffering is the gate through which one must pass who wants to come to the one whom you seek there" (*LBEW* 2 [205.1–3, 5–7]).

Nevertheless, Suso's espousal of a literal *imitatio passionis* is not uncritical. In his auto-hagiographical *Life* – a paradigm of exemplary spirituality in which Suso's third-person "I," the servant, is foliated, and the illusive historical "I" interfaces fluidly with the literary "I" and the mystical "I" (Haas 1971: 154–155, 192–197, 206–208; Ruh 1996: 422, 445; McGinn 2005: 195, 202–203) – the servant graduates to the highest school of perfect detachment in Chapter 19 (*L.* 19 [53.8–54.32]). He transforms his understanding of *imitatio passionis* from severe physical penitential suffering and external annihilation (the lower school) (*L.* 13–18 [34.4–53.4], especially 14 [37.24–38.21]) to inner kenotic detachment from the self modeled on Job that leads to union in the divine ground (the highest school on earth) (*L.* 19 [53.11–16, 54. 1–8]). The servant now realizes that if you " 'look inward enough . . . you will find your self as you actually are and you will notice that, even with all your external practices that you yourself performed out of your own ground, you are still too unreleased to receive external adversity. You are still like a scared rabbit that lies hidden in a bush and is frightened by every falling leaf' " (*L.* 19, [54.19–24]). The servant discovers that the way of inner releasement is the most difficult and painful of all paths because it is the road of defenselessness, rejection, deceit, doubt, depression, fear of damnation, and abandonment by God (*L.* 20 [57.1–24]; 21 [61.24–63.6]). Reminiscent of Augustine's "take and read" conversion (see Chapter 13, this volume), the servant is commanded to open his window and "look and learn." As he sees a dog playing with a tattered doormat in his mouth – throwing it around and tearing holes in it – the servant realizes that this will happen to him in the mouths of his fellow friars and that he needs to surrender himself to it (*L.* 20 [58.3–16]).

Influenced by Eckhart, Suso incorporated the notion of detachment from the self as an essential component of his thought. Eckhart even appears to the servant in a vision in the *Life* to counsel him about how to achieve proper detachment. In the vision, Eckhart states, " 'He should dissolve himself with respect to his 'selfhood' through deep releasement, and receive all things from God and not from creatures' " (*L.* 6 [23.9–12]). Suso's concern with the distinction between true and false forms of releasement and freedom was an effect of misconstruals of these Eckhartian notions and the suspicion against the so-called heresy of the Free Spirit (*L.* 48 [160.15–163.11]). Suso's critique against the heresy of the Free Spirit and misappropriations of Eckhart is evident in the disciple's dialogue with the "Nameless Wild One" – at times misinterpreted as signifying Eckhart – who refuses to be tamed and wants to live in unfettered freedom (*LBT* 6 [352.11–357.8]). Suso believed that Eternal Wisdom serves as the guide for healthy discernment and proper releasement that leads to genuine freedom and understanding of all truth. Consonant with Eckhart and Tauler, Suso imagined a synthetic relationship between action and contemplation (*L.* 50 [174:29–175.18]). The works of a detached person no longer occupies or possesses him, but he is free in his activity with only God as his intention.

A difference between Eckhart and Suso was the role ascribed to raptures and accompanying visions. Although Eckhart did not eschew ecstasy and visions in his thought, they did not possess the central position and authorizing role that they did in Suso's mysticism. However, Suso also problematized the paradoxical character of visions, construing

an imageless reality through images. He described this complicated process as driving out images through images (*L.* 53 [191.6–12]; Haas 1995: 203–204). He thus highlighted the actuality of created, embodied existence within finite thought-, language-, and image-parameters as well as the slippage between truth's simplicity and the image, and the fact that an image is "thousandfold more unlike than it is like" and part of an apophatic methodology (*L.* 53 [191.8–9, 193.31–194.2]).

Despite the importance of ecstatic experiences in Suso's mystical theology, rapture marked the outset of the mystical journey, while union constituted its goal. In the *Life*, the servant details an ecstatic experience "when he was still a beginner" (*L.* 2 [10.11]). Suso simultaneously tints this momentary jubilation in affective-ecstatic and apophatic hues. He illustrates how the servant was transported out of himself and "his soul was ecstasized in the body or out of the body. There he saw and heard what is ineffable to all tongues: it was formless or wayless, and yet it contained within itself the joyous delight of all forms and ways. His heart was insatiate yet satiated . . . He did nothing but stare into the luminous refulgence, in which he forgot himself and all things . . . Whether the soul remained in the body or was separated from the body, he did not know. When he came to himself again, then he felt in every way like a person who had come from a different world" (*L.* 2 [10.16–25, 10.29–11.2]).

Suso cautiously modified Eckhart's controversial notion of indistinct union by maintaining that the self is not wholly dissolved into divine nothingness since a distinction between God and human always remains. Even though Suso at times resorted to language that seemed to indicate an all-consuming union, he still signaled the distinction by asserting that the released person becomes one spirit with God, alluding to 1 Corinthians 6:17 (*LBT* 4 [336.7–24]). In Chapter 48 of his *Life*, Suso stressed that annihilation of the self and withdrawal into the Godhead does not suggest the transubstantiation of created nature into divine nature. Instead, God and creature remain ontologically distinct, even though rapture leads the soul to amnesia about the self and to see all things as God (*L.* 48 [162.26–28, 162.31–163.8]; 52 [187.17–190.2]). Although the soul may apprehend only the nothingness of complete oneness within the ground, this absorptive indistinction is, Suso insists, a matter of perception due to the complete loss of self-awareness in detachment and not an ontological reality (*LBT* 5 [343.18–19, 350.21–28]; 6 [354.13–15]). Echoing Tauler, Suso writes: "In this sinking away of the self, the spirit fades away, but not completely. It surely obtains certain qualities of the Godhead, although it does not become God by nature. What happens to it happens by grace because it is a something, created out of nothing, that remains forever. For one can say this much: that in this fading away, as the soul is taken in . . . it becomes lost, when it is relieved from its 'itsness' in his 'hisness' as it is unconscious of itself . . . And this happened to it when the spirit in itself turned away from its own and all things' 'becomeness' toward the naked 'unbecomeness' of nothingness" (*L.* 52 [187.23–188.7, 188.17–19]). Invited into "the stillness of the transfigured, resplendent darkness in the naked, simple oneness," the soul, who has sunk away from the self and its faculties, experiences the "highest blessedness" and, in the "super-essential Trinity of the godhead above God, in the mysterious, super-unknown, super-radiant, highest summit, there, by remaining 'silent-speakingly' quiet, one hears wonders – wonders!" (*L.* 52 [189.23–190.2, 190.14–16]).

Conclusion

Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Henry Suso cultivated an original mysticism of the ground, which amounted to more than a creative synthesis of the past mystical traditions. They were products of the new mysticism of the late Middle Ages and also helped shape it. United in their Dominican roots, they developed many shared concepts, though they also differed in aspects of their mystical theologies, in part, reflective of the contentious influence of Eckhart. They professed an intimate union between God and creation that permeates and sanctifies daily life and brims with truth in inwardness and outwardness from a limitless ground. This medieval Dominican mysticism continues to yield an abundant harvest today.

Notes

1   Throughout this article, I use the critical edition of Meister Eckhart's work *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*. I refer to the Latin Works as LW and the Middle High German works as DW. All translations are my own. For English translations of Eckhart's work, see, for example, Walshe and McGinn; Colledge and McGinn; McGinn 1986.
2   For Johannes Tauler's sermons, I use the critical edition by Ferdinand Vetter, *Die Predigten Taulers*. All translations are my own. For an English translation, see, for example, Maria Shrady, *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*.
3   For Henry Suso's German works, I employ the critical edition by Karl Bihlmeyer, *Heinrich Seuse: Deutsche Schriften*. All translations are my own. For an English translation, see, for example, Frank Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*.
4   I use the critical edition by Pius Künzle, *Heinrich Seuses Horologium Sapientiae*. All translations are my own. For an English translation, see, for example, Edmund Colledge, *Wisdom's Watch upon the Hours: Bl. Henry Suso*.

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CHAPTER 24

The Late Fourteenth-Century English Mystics

Christiania Whitehead

The idea of a discrete group of late fourteenth-century English mystics, comprising Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the anonymous *Cloud* author and Julian of Norwich, is, to a large degree, a late twentieth-century construct.[1] Nicholas Watson lists the handful of English Benedictine, Augustinian and Jesuit scholars from the 1960s and 1970s – David Knowles, Edmund Colledge, James Walsh – whose pioneering editions and monographs on late medieval English mysticism shaped the contours of this group, and interprets their work as an expression of their wish to excavate an distinctively *English* tradition of Catholic mysticism prior to the Reformation, to "re-naturalize Catholicism as authentically English" (Watson 1999: 542). Their perception of a "canon" of related mystics was adopted and strengthened within the academy during the 1980s and 1990s, although interestingly, due to the vernacular voice of these writers, most of the scholarship in this area came, not from departments of theology, but from departments of medieval English literature. The validity of this "canon" has been strongly contested in the last ten years. Recent analyses have tended to emphasize *difference* rather than continuity, and have restored the devotional context and historical specificity lacking from earlier accounts. However, beyond the academy, enthusiasm for the "group" continues unabated. From the 1970s onwards, there has been a steady stream of devotional responses to the Middle English mystics, in particular, Julian and the *Cloud* author, by Anglican, Episcopalian and Catholic writers. Extracts from the mystics have been assembled into devotional anthologies, their writings have formed the focus of meditation circles, prayer groups and retreats, and their lives have become the subject of plays and novels in their own right. In addition, working from the assumption that these writers are somehow transhistorical in implication, functioning as honorary members of the present, they have been mobilized to lend support to religious agendas as diverse as the movement for the ordination of women, ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, and the war against modernity (Whitehead 131–151).

For all the problems that surround the category of the fourteenth-century English mystics, they were linked together in various fifteenth-century manuscript compilations, most notably the British Library "Amherst" manuscript (Cré 17–59), and their writings set alongside translations of various continental mystics. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the fourteenth-century continental mystics exercised no direct influence upon the *oeuvre* of their English counterparts, but that rather, for the most part, the primary influences upon their writings stretch back a century or so earlier. On the one hand, the fourteenth-century English mystics were the recipients of a distinctive *native* tradition of thirteenth-century anchoritic instruction and affective meditation in English and Anglo-Latin, by such writers as Anselm of Canterbury, Aelred of Rievaulx, the anonymous authors of *Ancrene Wisse* and the "Wooing Group," Walter of Wimborne and John of Hoveden. On the other, they were also marked by certain twelfth- and thirteenth-century *continental* textual models – the affective commentary tradition upon the *Song of Songs* spearheaded by Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St-Thierry (see Chapters 2 and 16, this volume); the Victorine categorization of contemplative ascent in relation to faculty psychology, mapped most influentially by Richard of St-Victor (see Chapter 17, this volume); the more recherché apophatic tradition exemplified by translations of and commentaries upon the works of Pseudo-Dionysius (see Chapters 4, 11, and 12, this volume), and finally, by the slightly later pseudo-Bonaventuran body of Franciscan texts focusing with emotion and empathy upon scenes from the life of Christ.

Richard Rolle

Richard Rolle, the earliest of the writers who form our focus, shows the mark of these varied anchoritic and affective traditions intertwined with a far older ascetic and eremitic tradition harking back to the desert fathers. Born c. 1305–1310 in Thornton, in North Yorkshire, he was sent to Oxford with the support of a local patron, but failed to complete his course of study and returned home. According to romanticized accounts, he then fled from home wearing an improvised habit made from the clothes of his sisters and began a new existence as a hermit, moving from place to place, acquiring and losing benefactors, and apparently incurring a degree of criticism for the irregularity of his lifestyle (he appears not to have adopted any recognized rule). Towards the end of his life Rolle seems to have settled in the vicinity of the Cistercian convent of Hampole, near Doncaster, acting as a spiritual advisor to a number of their nuns and female recluses. He died in this area in 1349, possibly a victim of the Black Death, and almost immediately became the subject of a local cult promoted by the priory (Watson 1991: 32–33; 1995a: 6–9).

Rolle is easily amongst the most prolific English religious writers of the late Middle Ages, leaving more than eleven major treatises and commentaries in Latin and English, together with a number of shorter commentaries, lyrics and prose pieces. Due to his huge popularity in the fifteenth century (around 500 manuscripts of his works remain extant), many further works were also attributed to him, and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have had to undertake the gargantuan task of disentan-

gling these attributions and establishing a "canon" of authentic productions along with a feasible chronology of composition.[2] Following some early biblical commentaries and prose works, most notably the pastoral manual *Judica me*, it is in the works of his "middle period" (c. 1335–1345) – *Incendium amoris*, *Melos amoris*, *Liber de amatores Dei contra amatores mundi* – that we see the establishment of some of Rolle's most characteristic themes and preoccupations. Central to these, and beguilingly eccentric, is Rolle's construction of himself as a saintly figure. *Incendium* praises the eremitic vocation, effectively representing it as the most exalted form of life. The man who submits himself wholeheartedly to this form will suffer worldly persecution and tribulation. He will violently reject the goods of the world, in particular, the attractions of women, in favour of the love of God. After due preparation and spiritual work, he will experience a triad of mystical sensations: *fervor* (burning), *canor* (song) and *dulcor* (sweetness), whereby the inner eye will be opened to heaven. These spiritual sensations, which should not be confused with physical sensations, bear comparison with the experience of the angels in heaven. Thus he will burn with love like the seraphim, and his prayers and thoughts will be turned into song, directly reproducing and participating in the spiritual harmonies of the angels. In opposition to the mainstream of mystical writing where such sensations tend to be viewed as momentary, gratuitous dispensations, the man blessed by these sensations will be able to sustain himself in a more or less permanent state of receptivity to them. Nonetheless, he will also be driven by desire for a fuller union with the beloved (Jesus), and will experience a strong and affirmatively expressed pull towards death as the best way of realizing this. Solitude and contemplative inaction are necessary prerequisites to the sensations of *fervor*, *canor* and *dulcor*, hence, the solitary life is superior in quality and reward to coenobitic monasticism and all expressions of the active life. A special devotion to the Name of Jesus is a further prerequisite.

All this is well and good. Rolle revives the patristic trope of the desert saint and communicates it in the highly charged language of medieval affectivity, interposing rhapsodic prose passages and poems of love-longing for Jesus. However, the startling fluctuations in narrative voice between first and third person throughout *Incendium*, and the inclusion of chapters of apparently autobiographical revelation, create a far more partisan tone than one would expect. Revealing the persecution *he* has encountered as a result of his eremitic lifestyle, *his* struggles regarding the lures of women, and elaborating on the precise moments, four years into his eremitic vocation, when *he* first experiences the fire of love and the sound of heavenly song, it is almost as though, in *Incendium* and allied treatises, Rolle engages in a form of auto-hagiography. The saintly hermit whose mystical triad of gifts suits him to be numbered amongst the elect turns out to be none other than himself. Lacking an institutional setting for his mystical encounters and subject to criticism by monks and priests (if his writings are to be believed), Rolle composes an account of the components of contemplation and the conditions required to achieve them, which can be viewed as a daring attempt to authorize and valorize his own individual experience (Watson 1991: 113–141).

The writings of Rolle's "late period" (c. 1345–1349) – principally *Emendatio vitae*, and the English epistles, *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living* – demonstrate a pronounced change in direction from the extraordinary project of

self-sanctification that seems to mark Rolle's mid-career. Couched in more impersonal, less self-aggrandizing tones, and devoid of the intrusions into autobiography that colour the earlier material, these treatises exemplify a new commitment to pastoral instruction, addressing secular clergy and individual nuns and anchoresses,[3] and expounding a systematic (in parts, relatively elementary) programme of spiritual development. These treatises still arrive at the same *end point* as the self-contemplating narratives of the previous decade; that is, they still culminate with rhapsodic expositions of the love of God and with the trio of sensations and longing for death that indicate a contemplative immersion in that love. But, unlike *Incendium* and *Melos*, they *show us how to get there*. They start with the basics of turning away from the world, keeping the commandments, desisting from sin, cleansing oneself through the apparatus of penitence, then create an ascent through a series of numbered, ever more sophisticated stages toward that goal. Common to nearly all these later works is the new contemplative topos of the three degrees of love, adapted and abridged from the four degrees of love – *insuperabilis*, *inseparabilis*, *singularis*, *insatiabilis* – enumerated in Richard of St. Victor's *De quattuor gradibus violentiae charitatis*. In Rolle, the first degree of love correlates with the elementary stages of the spiritual life: keeping the commandments and stabilizing oneself upon the articles of faith. The second degree involves forsaking the world, following Christ in poverty, repeating liturgical prayers, practicing passion meditations, and showing special devotion to the Holy Name. The third degree essentially equates with the contemplative life. In this degree, one will experience *fervor*, *dulcor* and *canor*, sing like the nightingale from love of Christ, and fervently yearn for death. These degrees are mobilized in slightly different ways in accordance with the aims and envisaged audiences of the various treatises. *Emendatio*, a structured programme of spiritual advance toward the contemplative life for monks and secular clergy, reserves its discussion of the three degrees until the two last chapters. *The Form of Living*, addressing a young woman at the beginning of her anchoritic enclosure, works through a great deal of catechesis-style instruction (three things help maintain cleanness of heart, three things assist in conforming our will to God, etc.) before describing the three degrees along with other advanced categorizations (five questions about love, seven ways of confirming the experience of charity) in the last third of the epistle. By contrast, *Ego dormio*, addressed to a nun and written slightly earlier, uses the three degrees as a structuring principle for the entire treatise. Rolle pigeon-holes this topos in a number of different ways, nonetheless, in all cases we see him transferring a contemplative categorization from its original, specialized, Victorine context, into pastoral or vernacular settings in which it is implicitly made accessible to a far broader audience of devout *non-litteratus*.

Rolle's moves toward the *non-litteratus*, originally confined solely to women religious, were expanded remarkably in the one hundred and fifty years following his death. *Incendium* was translated into English in 1435 by the Carmelite, Richard Misyn, while *Emendatio*, with its broader programme of spiritual transformation, was translated no fewer than seven times, becoming one of the most widely copied and circulated texts in late medieval England.[4] Whilst these texts and others by Rolle continued to be read by members of the religious orders – we know that he was particularly popular with the Carthusians, many more found their way into lay hands, and it would appear that

his advocacy of an intensely felt inner life, relatively unlinked to institutional rules or restrictions, made his writings extremely appealing to spiritually ambitious laypeople who sought to internalize the conditions of solitude conducive to contemplation via personal devotional regimes. Of course there were criticisms too, and it would be surprising if such a colourful and controversial figure as Rolle did not continue to excite strong sentiments. Thomas Bassett's *Defensorium contra oblectratores Ricardi* answers the objections to Rolle's mysticism posed by a hypothetical Carthusian. From the points that he makes we can deduce that not everyone was convinced by Rolle's account of *fervor*, and that some deplored the freedom he appeared to give his readers: "[Rolle] made men judges of themselves."[5] More generally, many expressed unease lest Rolle's trademark triad of spiritual sensations be misunderstood as a *physical* set of feelings, and both Hilton and the *Cloud* author devote considerable space to warning readers against this temptation, and to downplaying the sophistication of a mysticism based wholly on sensory phenomena.[6]

Walter Hilton

Unlike Rolle, Walter Hilton shows far less faith in the exalted possibilities of eremitic solitude. Born before 1343, and educated at Cambridge as a canon lawyer, Hilton initially abandoned a promising legal career to live as a recluse. However, his earliest Latin treatise, *De imagine peccati*, addressed to another recluse, expresses dissatisfaction with the solitary life (Clark and Taylor 69), and, by the early 1380s he seems to have resolved to exchange reclusion for a more communal regime, entering the priory of Augustinian canons at Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire, where he remained until his death in 1396. Hilton's defence of the vowed religious life against "heretics" who question its utility in *Epistola de utilitate de prerogativis religionis* (Clark and Taylor 103), and his defence of the veneration of images in another Latin treatise, *De adoracione ymaginum*, suggest that he was actively involved in the church's response to the Wycliffite controversies of the 1380s and 1390s, and that his writings functioned as orthodox interventions within that debate (see Chapter 6, this volume).

Hilton's most widely circulated English work, *The Scale of Perfection*, a sizeable treatise in two books, was probably written during his time at Thurgarten, sometime between 1380 and 1396. The two books are rather different from one another – the first is addressed to a woman recluse, while the second allegedly assumes a broader readership – and scholars have postulated that the books may have been conceived relatively independently and written some distance apart in time. Despite the title of the book, the image of a ladder of spiritual ascent (derived from Guigo II's *Scala claustralium*) only appears once briefly (*Scale* II ch. 17), and the work as a whole is predominantly structured around the idea of two sequential images within the soul – an *imago peccati* (image of sin) which must be mastered and broken down, and a deeply buried and obscured *imago Dei*, which must be rediscovered and restored. This idea of the *imago peccati*, which was already taking shape in Hilton's early writings (his earliest Latin epistle, *De imagine peccati*, explores this trope), is probably an imaginative expansion of scattered Pauline references: "our old self was crucified with him so that the body

of sin might be done away with" (Romans 6:6); "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24); "you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:9–10); "If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). Unlike Rolle, who shows scant interest in the work against sin (although every interest in mapping the higher realms of contemplative experience), Hilton devotes the bulk of *Scale* I to delineating this image and outlining methods to uproot it. His exposition bears the influence of the catechetical images used within confessional manuals and sermons[7] – the soul is something like a polluted well generating streams of sin; it is a plant or tree bearing branches of sin; it is a hideous body or idol whose body parts equate with the seven deadly sins:

> The heed is pride . . . The baak and the hyndre part of it is coveitise . . . The brest, in whiche is the herte, is envie . . . The armes of it aren wraththe . . . The beli of this image is glotonye . . . The membris of hit aren leccherie . . . The feet of this ymage aren accidie. (*Scale* I ch. 85)

However, whereas the manuals tend to elaborate upon a single, clearly visualizable image, Hilton's image changes form and identity in a bewildering fashion. Sin issues in streams; it consists of black and stinking clothes; it is a composite form that must be turned upside down to see the envy and anger branching out of it, then lifted up in order to see the covetousness that pervades it (*Scale* I chs. 64, 71). Much of the time it is not so much an object of sight as impediment to sight – a smoke or a darkness. At its most radical, it is nothing at all, the very antithesis of being:

> I telle thee it is like to no bodili thing. "What is it thanne?" seistow. Sothli it is not . . . This nought is nothynge ellis but a lackynge of love and of light . . . Thou schalt grise and lothe this nought right as it were the devyl of helle, and thou schalt despice it and al tobreke it. (*Scale* I chs. 53–54)

Hilton darts between images and their contraries, between vision and non-vision, and between being and nothingness, in order to convey the protean instability and insubstantiality of the unregenerate self. Although he has far less to say against the imagination than the *Cloud* author (and indeed cultivates a very orthodox voice on the subject in *De adoracione ymaginum*), nonetheless, it seems to me that he manipulates the *imago peccati* in this way in order to *curtail* the resources of the imagination in contemplating the body of sin, and to prevent any one image either from being interpreted too literally or from gaining too intensive a mental hold. This is an image that must be subordinated and broken down rather than being allowed to stand intact.

Scale II resumes the spiritual narrative at the moment when the image of sin has been successfully mastered, and the image of Christ can begin to be restored within the soul. This second image was there anyway – and I think we are required to see it as far more intrinsic and substantial than the image of sin – but, like the drachma in the gospel parable, it has been lost within the house of the soul amidst the debris and darkness of sin (*Scale* I ch. 48). In other words, to search successfully for Christ we must

look within ourselves. As we turn our vision inward, we will begin to realize that our soul consists of three parts: mind, reason, and will, reflecting the tripartite structure of the Trinity. This perception of the soul, and of the soul as a means to understanding God, bears the hallmark of Augustinian theology (in particular, St. Augustine's *De trinitate*), in keeping with the interests of Hilton's community (Bryan 69; Clark 1979a). While Rolle translates a Victorine vocabulary of contemplative grades for a *non-litteratus* audience, it is Hilton who deserves most credit for widening access to key themes from patristic theology.

There are two ways of restoring the image of Christ in the soul. Those engaged in the active life can restore it through faith, identified primarily with the reception of the sacraments, while those engaged in the contemplative life should restore it through faith and feeling. The remainder of *Scale* II elaborates on the movement towards contemplation, citing the imperative of desire (Jesus paradoxically lies at each end of this desire – he is both its source and its goal), and configuring it as a pilgrimage toward a spiritual Jerusalem. Initiated through meekness and love, key virtues for all the mystics, this pilgrimage includes a passage of difficult darkness signifying the withdrawal of the senses from worldly affections. Briefly adopting the oxymoronic language of Dionysian theology and of the *Cloud* author, Hilton describes this darkness as a "lighti merkenesse . . . and a riche nought" (*Scale* II ch. 27). Nonetheless, his contemplative temperament shares little in common with exponents of the *via negativa* and, reshaping their hermeneutics to reflect his more Augustinian preoccupations, he defines this darkness, not as a site of "unkunnynge" but as a place of self-knowledge. In the final stages of contemplation, on the other side of this darkness, the inner eye is opened through reason and spiritual love and granted insight into the nature and causes of bodily creatures, the blessed and the damned angels, and into the secrets of the Trinity. Unlike Rolle, whose exemplary solitary appears capable of sustaining this insight indefinitely, Hilton is at pains to emphasize its momentariness. Grace will inevitably come and go in this life. In addition, Hilton also makes a point of relegating the extraordinary spiritual sensations of heat, song or sweetness from this advanced level of insight, post-darkness, back to the earliest stages of the contemplative life. They are not spiritual feelings at all, he says, only imagined feelings (*Scale* II chs. 29–31), and the imagination must be replaced by reason in the advance towards perfection (a very Victorine idea).

There is a lack of critical consensus on Hilton's intended audience for *Scale* II. Whilst most critics favour the idea that he was writing for a broader readership than *Scale* I and effectively widening access to contemplation to the laity (Watson 1999: 557; Clark 1979b: 271–274), I tend to align myself with Denise Baker who argues that Hilton's exposition of the reformation in faith and feeling essentially portrays the life of professional solitude (Baker 1999: 97–102). It is possible that universalist readings of *Scale* II may have been prompted by the subject matter of Hilton's second most widely circulated treatise, his *Epistle on the Mixed Life*. Here, Hilton addresses a nobleman who has contemplative ambitions but is simultaneously bound by obligations to his family, household and estate. In order to integrate these opposing pulls, the epistle proposes a composite form of living: a "mixed life," positioned midway between the traditional binaries of the active and contemplative vocations. Jesus' life, a mixture of worldly

ministry and desert retreat, is cited as a prototype for this mixed vocation. So too are Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:14–30). Reorienting the Victorine exegesis of these marriages in which Leah symbolizes the active life, Rachel, the contemplative, and Jacob is shown to progress from the former to the latter, Hilton innovatively emphasizes the co-existence of both wives: Jacob was married to *both at once*. The active and contemplative vocations are co-existent possibilities.

Hilton's *Mixed Life* sounds very new, but in fact the third way that it describes shows a marked similarity to the composite lifestyle recommended by Gregory the Great for pastors and prelates (Windeatt 109–110) (see Chapter 15, this volume). As a result, its achievement mainly consists in adapting and redirecting these episcopal precepts for the use of a devout lay audience, and, as with Augustine's tripartite vision of the soul, translating key ideas from patristic theology into the vernacular. The recommendation to mixed living found a ready readership amongst the laity through the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and in fact, for all its initial specialization, *in practice* the two books of the *Scale*, in particular *Scale* I, also seem to have been used by lay readers as a means to cultivating this composite life, encouraging them to turn their vision inwards and overthrow the *imago peccati* in the midst of secular activity.[8]

The *Cloud* Author

Hilton and the *Cloud* author, writing in likelihood in the same Nottinghamshire locale, in the 1380s and 90s, occasionally seem to be engaged in a debate with one another. The *Cloud* author refers his reader to "anoþer mans werk" to fill gaps left in his own programme of contemplative instruction (*Cloud* ch. 35), while Hilton takes issue with some of the more abstract and apophatic elements of the *Cloud* author's vocabulary, and rewrites his "derknes . . . of vnknowyng" in more purposeful and transitional terms. This sense of their association extends into the fifteenth century, when several Carthusian manuscripts attribute *The Cloud of Unknowing* to Hilton. Nonetheless, there are also profound differences of temperament and method between the two writers, and in many ways the seven treatises attributed to the *Cloud* author: *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Book of Privy Counselling*, *The Epistle of Prayer*, *The Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings*, *Hid Divinity* (a translation of Pseudo-Dionysius's *De mystica theologia*) *Benjamin minor* (an adaptation of Richard of St. Victor's treatise of the same name) and *A Treatise of Discerning of Spirits* – all occupy a unique place amongst the contemplative productions of the late fourteenth century.[9] We know remarkably little for certain about the *Cloud* author, although the strong Carthusian influences upon his writing (notably, Guigo II and Hugh of Balma) and the Carthusian provenance of many of the manuscripts containing those writings suggest that he may have been a member of that order (Glasscoe 167; Lees 422–479).[10] Unlike Rolle and Hilton, the *Cloud* author does not reach out, even by implication, to those outside the religious life. On the contrary, he is explicitly concerned to limit the circulation of his texts to professional practitioners of contemplation ("a parfite folower of Criste . . . in þe souerinnest pointe of contemplatife leuing" *Cloud*, Prologue), and that stipulation seems to have set the

tone for later dissemination: there is no evidence that *Cloud*-author manuscripts ever reached the hands of the laity in the century following its composition.

Part of the *Cloud* author's caution concerning readership undoubtedly stems from the esoteric character of his theology. Unlike Rolle and Hilton, whose affective and Augustinian enthusiasms lie squarely within the affirmative mainstream of western theology, the *Cloud* author takes his cue – uniquely in the English vernacular – from the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Pseudo-Dionysius's writings developed a following in the west from the twelfth century onwards through Latin translations and commentaries; in this particular instance, the *Cloud* author's contact seems to have been made via the Latin versions of Thomas Gallus and John Sarracenus (Lees 159–377). Negative theology centres on our inability to *know* anything about God through the resources of our intellect. On the contrary, everything we might imagine that we know – the attributes of God, his operations as deduced through scholastic theology, his manifestation via the life of Christ or via the lives of his saints, is conceived as a hindrance, not a help. These images need to be removed from the mind and stamped underfoot, along with the memory of worldly objects, within a cloud of forgetting. The phrase which returns repeatedly is of developing a "nakid [*nudus*] mynde." The contemplative then needs to enter the darkness of the cloud of unknowing which lies between himself and God, and to wait there in a condition of blind longing. More than any other of the English mystic writers, the *Cloud* author emphases receptivity: the realization that we are dependent on God to take the initiative. Nonetheless, he exhorts the contemplative to beat upon the cloud with desirous love, which may be expressed either as a dart of love, or as a single, one-syllable word: GOD or LOVE, used repetitiously. As with Hilton, agency is short-circuited by the observation that it is God who stirs our desires in this way (*Cloud* ch. 34).

Unlike Hilton, whose darkness is a transitional state preceding light (and Rolle, who barely touches upon darkness), the *Cloud* author shows little desire to advance his pupil *beyond* this condition of darkness and blindness: the cloud is the place where one encounters God. As such, he is extremely negative about the resources of the visual imagination. Whilst other devotional and contemplative writers give imaginative visualizations of Christ's humanity an important intermediate role within spiritual development (meditation on the passion inhabits the second degree of love in Rolle's taxonomy), drawing on insular and Franciscan affective traditions, the *Cloud* author actively opposes such practices: they serve as nothing but a distraction from his "higher work." Similarly, where the devotional mainstream offers systematic images and numerative methods for picking through sin (even Hilton does this to some extent – his *imago peccati* is more complex than most, but the seven deadly sins are still discernible within it), the *Cloud* author disallows the entire discourse. Don't analyze sin as "venial" or "mortal," he says; don't divide it into seven parts; don't start analyzing your behaviour against these parts, you will never arrive at contemplation this way (*Cloud* ch. 40). Rather, perceive your sin as a totality, as a "lumpe," and equate that lump with yourself. That "lumpe," that intrinsically sinful self-realization, must be committed to the cloud of forgetting along with everything else. Here again, we find yet another difference in emphasis. Hilton exalts the role of self-knowledge in the contemplative movement

towards God in accordance with his Augustinianism. The *Cloud* author demands the jettisoning of even this fundamental self-awareness, terming it a "nakid weting & a felyng of þin owne beyng":

> Þou schalt fynde, when þou hast for3eten alle oþer creatures & alle þeire werkes, 3e, & therto alle þin owne werkes, þat þer schal leue 3it after, bitwix þee & þi God, *a nakid weting & a felyng of þin owne beyng*: þe whiche wetyng & felyng behouiþ alweis be distroied, er þe tyme be þat þou fele soþfastly þe perfeccyon of þis werk. (*Cloud* ch. 43, my italics)

Since the necessity of suppressing all thoughts and images is extremely hard to put into practice, in fact the *Cloud* author spends much of his treatise recommending "dodges" for countering unwanted thoughts and images as they surface within the mind. His negative methodology also presents a challenge to the physical premises of language – how to express the experience of the cloud without succumbing to spatial and imagistic terms, and the final third of the treatise is largely concerned with deconstructing spatial vocabulary and pointing up the limitations of language to comprehend contemplative union, to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in pre-modern English writing.

Lauding "lewed" love over clerical learning, and the virtues of the single, unglossed word over scholastic explication and analysis, it is part of the *Cloud* treatise's strategy to appear remarkably free of patristic reference and scriptural exegesis. Nonetheless, the treatise still remains attached to exegetical tradition even if it opts not to acknowledge this. The central image of the cloud in fact derives from Moses' entry into a cloud on the summit of Mount Sinai to converse with God (Exodus 24:13–18). However, we are given insufficient information to make this connection until the very end of the treatise where we finally learn that Moses received the dimensions of the Ark of the Covenant (signifying contemplation) on Mount Sinai, Bezaleel built it in the valley, and Aaron was granted access to it whenever he pleased (*Cloud* chs. 71–73). The tradition of reading Moses' cloud as the state of darkness or ignorance in which one encounters God goes back ultimately to Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis*, and can be glimpsed from time to time within Victorine writing. The interpretation of Moses, Bezaleel and Aaron as three different types of contemplative also derives from Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin major*. Indeed, the *Benjamin major* in its entirety is focused upon the same episode from Exodus, although whereas Richard devotes most of his attention to the materials and dimensions of the Ark, aligning them with the contemplative faculties of the mind, the *Cloud* author positions himself half a chapter earlier, constructing his entire contemplative instruction from the briefly adduced image of the cloud in keeping with his Dionysian sympathies. Richard of St. Victor comes clean from the start about the scriptural foundation of his contemplative hermeneutics. Two centuries later, as part of his campaign to strip away every reference which could conceivably "scatter" the mind from its required "nakid[ness]," the *Cloud* author seeks to place his reader in a cloud that is linked to nothing and does not lead anywhere – neither to scripture, nor to scholarship, nor to contemplative tradition: all distracting food for the discursive mind; nor to anything but itself. Only in retrospect, at the end of the treatise, once the emptiness that this entails has been experienced for some seventy chapters, does

the author release the additional information about Moses, Bezaleel and Aaron, that acts to anchor his instruction within scripture and exegetical tradition, and grant it precautionary *auctoritas*.

Julian of Norwich

Our final mystical author, Julian of Norwich, restores the efficacy of the visual and the verbal in her visionary narrations, albeit with an unprecedented degree of complexity. Born in 1342, Julian seems likely to have been a member of a gentry or minor aristocratic family, and to have been brought up in or near Norwich. She receives the main body of her revelations in May 1373, as she lies dangerously ill upon a sickbed, although opinion remains divided on whether she was living in lay circumstances at this time, or had entered the Benedictine convent at Carrow.[11] Her account of these revelations exists in two distinct versions known as the Short Text and the Long Text. The Short Text – a succinct account of raw visionary experience, traditionally located relatively near to the revelations themselves in the 1370s, is now widely thought to date from the mid or late 1380s, possibly triggered by a secondary revelation of 1388. Vincent Gillespie suggests that Julian may have have been going through the processes of anchoritic enclosure at this time (she was enclosed as an anchoress in the Benedictine cell at St. Julian's church, Conesford, Norwich), and that her Short Text may have been produced in response to the ecclesiastical *probatio vitae* conducted into lay candidates for enclosure (Gillespie 196). However, focused on vision rather than interpretation, and relatively theologically cautious, the Short Text seems to have been abandoned "in favour of a wholesale . . . more radical rewrite" between the mid 1390s and Julian's death in 1416 (Gillespie 196). This revision, known as the Long Text, subjects the original visions to layer upon layer of additional commentary and exegesis, which may itself have been perceived as a supplementary divine instruction: "the good lord shewid this booke shuld be otherwise performid than at the first writing."[12]

   Unlike Rolle, Hilton, and even to some degree, the *Cloud* author, Julian's writing seems to have remained practically unknown throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The only extant witness to the Short Text is the mid fifteenth-century Amherst manuscript (Crè 99–122), while the Long Text survives as a series of excerpts in West-minster Cathedral Treasury MS 4 (c. 1500), in two seventeenth-century manuscripts copied by nuns in the English Benedictine houses of Paris or Cambrai,[13] and in an early printed edition (1670), edited by Serenus Cressy, probably based upon the Paris manuscript.[14]

   The Short Text opens with Julian's spiritual ambition to receive three spiritual gifts: mind of Christ's passion, bodily sickness, and three wounds of contrition, compassion and "wilfulle langinge to God" (ch. 1). This ambition apparently comes to fruition when she is overtaken by serious illness, aged thirty, and receives sixteen visions of Christ's passion, activated by the sight of the crucifix that a priest holds before her eyes as she lies ill. These sixteen visions work within a recognized tradition of passion meditations, pseudo-Bonaventurean *vitae Christi*, and visionary writing by women,[15] although where the meditations and *vitae Christi* tend to present a sustained narrative of

the passion, Julian's revelations function as a series of animated snapshots of iconic moments: blood trickling down from the crown of thorns, blood coagulating from the scourge wounds, the drying and discoloration of the face shortly before death. These visions are interspliced with more abstract seeings – everything that is made as a hazelnut in the palm of the hand (ch. 4), God in a point (ch. 8), three heavens (ch. 12) – and with numbered secondary perceptions arising from the primary seeings: "In this firste shewinge of oure lorde I sawe sex thinges in mine understandinge" (ch. 5). The different *modes* by which Julian sees: "be bodilye sight, and be worde formede in mine understandinge, and be gastelye sight" (ch. 7), which seem to correspond to traditional Augustinian categorizations of corporeal, intellectual and imaginative vision, are also differentiated repeatedly and emphatically (Watson 1998: 66–67).

The Short Text identifies Julian as "a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle," takes pains to stress that she is *not* a teacher, and describes her experience as a personalized representation of universal Christian experience: "Alle that I saye of myselfe, I meene in the persone of alle mine evencristene" (ch. 6). The Long Text removes the references to gender identity which disqualify Julian, in her own estimation, from an exegetical role, and swathes the original visions in additional layers of commentary and interpretation, meaning in effect that Julian becomes a commentator upon her own revelations, arrogating to herself a role generally reserved for the clergy. It also implicitly challenges the orthodox assessment of passion meditation (meditation upon Christ in his humanity) as a relatively *elementary* devotional practice. Here, by contrast, Julian looks *through* Christ on the cross to a vision of his majesty in heaven, and to complex insights into sin, the Trinity, and Christ's work within creation – as her gaze remains doggedly trained upon the cross, Christ's expression finally transforms from pain into bliss (ch. 21). An intellectually undemanding practice associated with the *non-litteratus*, and of course particularly with women, is rehabilitated as a vehicle of sophisticated theology. As Julian follows Christ's gaze in various directions, she begins to puzzle about the apparent non-existence of sin. Building upon the Augustinian premise that sin lacks substantial reality and can be discerned only by the pain it causes (ch. 27), Julian is shown – contrary to Augustine – that we sin out of blindness and ignorance, rather than disobedience, and that the pain we experience as a result has a pedagogic and refining function, culminating in a joyful reward within heaven (ch. 38). Where is God's anger towards sin in all this? It also is simply non-existent. Julian is shown that the only anger generated by sin is human anger, arising from the shortcomings in our might, wisdom and goodness (ch. 48). It is impossible for God to be angry. Rather, he entreats a peace against *our* anger (ch. 49).

As might be expected, Julian furrows her brow at the relation of this showing to orthodox church teaching on sin as a consequence of innate human depravity, and on God's just wrath towards sinners. Again and again, she lays the two apparently incompatible teachings alongside each other, stressing her full obedience to the doctrine of the church. In the Short Text, the resolution to this dilemma, such as it is, is taken very little further than the oft-repeated divine phrase, " 'Botte alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinge shalle be wele' (ch. 13), with its eccentric overtones of universal salvation. The Long Text opens these contraries into the Example of the Lord and the Servant" (ch. 51).[16] A servant is sent to do his lord's will. He runs off with such great zeal that he falls into a hollow and bruises himself badly. The lord, realizing that the servant's

fall was the result of his desire to please his lord, rewards rather than punishing him. Since the servant is named as Adam, the example offers a radical reinterpretation of the causes and consequences of the Fall. However, twenty years after her initial revelations, Julian writes that she has been given additional divine insight about its meaning. Now she is shown that the servant is both Christ and Adam, and that Adam's fall through zeal and inexperience is simultaneous with, even synonymous to, Christ's fall into incarnated form, and into the human experience of pain and tribulation. Both are judged blameless by the lord, and both are raised up, dressed in new robes, and glorified. By contrast with the oppositional relationship between the old and the new Adam (the *imago peccati* and the *imago Dei*) expressed in Hilton's writings and derived from Pauline teaching, Julian binds the two together into a single intention (for the good) and motion, and subjects both to a single final evaluation and vindication. This is a startling new theology – wholly non-Augustinian in the optimistic account it gives of human desire and motivation.

In addition to the Example of the Lord and Servant, the Long Text also interpolates a second extended section (chs. 54–63), developing a bipartite reading of the soul, and describing the motherhood of Christ. Julian describes how she is shown that the soul consists of two parts: the changeable sensuality, grounded in "kynd," which fails and suffers, yet remains linked closely to Christ, and the changeless substance, which dwells at peace with God. The bipartition and hierarchical ordering of the soul between feminized sensuality and masculine reason is theologically commonplace, but Denise Baker highlights how Julian modifies this commonplace by refusing to gender either part, and by responding to the function of the sensuality in unprecedentedly positive terms. Rather than supressing the sensuality in favour of the reason, in Julian's eyes holiness arises from the harmonization and recognition of the two parts (Baker 1994: 129). This rehabilitation of the sensuality leads into a discussion of Christ's close association with our sensuality through his incarnation, and of his consequent mothering function:

> For oure substance is hole in ech person in the trinite, which is one God. And oure sensualite is only in the second person, Crist Jhesu . . . the seconde person in the trinite is oure moder in kind in oure substantial making, in whom we be grounded and roted, and he is oure moder of mercy in oure sensualite taking. (ch. 58)

In matter of fact, Christ exercises three maternities. As the second person of the Trinity, he is the agent (or mother) of Creation; he exercises a second motherhood "of grace" through the act of incarnation; and finally, he demonstrates a motherhood "in werking" through the crucifixional death which brings us to birth in eternal life (chs. 59–60). Julian shows most interest in this third maternity of "werking," and develops the idea at length. Christ suckles us with the sacrament of his blood, leading us not to his breast but to the wound in his side. As we grow older, he alters his nurturing to suit our requirements, but never his love. He allows us to fall and endure superficial pain "for [our] own profite," as a parent must, but will not allow us to face any real danger. And when we fall and feel ashamed, he invites us to respond as a distressed child would, and to run hastily to Christ, our mother (chs. 60–61). Again, it is important to emphasize that this trope is not so original as many contemporary devotional respondents to Julian would suggest; it appears from time to time in patristic exegesis, and is used in the writings

of Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Albert the Great and others. Nonetheless, it is true to say that Julian ponders it in considerably greater detail and with considerably greater precision, according it a central role in her christology. And of course, her attention to this trope as a woman can be viewed as a riposte to scholastic clerical constructions of the feminine. Julian advances from the explicit devaluation of her femininity in the Short Text ("a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle"), to the confident construction of Christ as a mother, some ten or fifteen years on, in the Long Text.

By the time Julian was writing her Long Text, the writings of the continental mystics (Suso, Porète, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Ruusbroec etc.) were beginning to be translated and to circulate in England. A number of fifteenth-century manuscript anthologies draw the English mystics into companionship with these continental counterparts. Yet while the works of Rolle and Hilton flourished in miscellanies, compilations and excerpted versions, many designed for devout lay consumption (the *Cloud* treatises remained confined within smaller monastic circles, Julian was largely unknown), England seems to have produced little that was new by way of homegrown mysticism through the fifteenth century. The authoritative account of this dearth, given over fifteen years ago now by Nicholas Watson, cites the censoring and silencing effects of Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* of 1409, a repressive piece of ecclesiastical legislation passed in the wake of the Lollard heresy, which placed severe limits upon vernacular religious writing (Watson 1995b). Faced with this legislation, Watson writes, "vernacular readers had little choice but to turn to books written in the brilliant years before the ban. Arundel created the canon of vernacular theology by the simple expedient of sealing it up" (Watson, 1999, 562). Watson's account sets a cautious and subdued fifteenth century against the halcyon days of the late 1300s. Recent discussions acknowledge the authoritative status of this argument but tend to view the fifteenth century in far more positive terms. Jennifer Bryan describes it as a century that dramatically expands upon the possibilities of fourteenth: the age of Rolle and Hilton's greatest popularity, when "those brilliant fourteenth-century theologies . . . worked themselves into the fabric of English devotional culture." Moreover, she writes, "since the censorship was not retroactive, even the most daring works were 'grandfathered' into orthodoxy" (Bryan 27), a formulation that applies especially well to Julian's revisionist theology and the apophatic methodology of the *Cloud* author. The fifteenth century then, can be accounted the heyday of these sophisticated, yet distinctly diverse, English mystical writers, and the period in which, to varying degrees and in varying ways, they exercised their most deeply felt effects upon vernacular devotional consciousness. Not until the second half of the twentieth century, in competition or collaboration with a new spread of spiritualities and religions, would they regain any portion of this contemplative prominence.

Notes

1   Margery Kempe's name has frequently been added to this list in recent years. However, since the focus of this chapter is on the late fourteenth-century mystics, I do not deal with Margaret in detail here.

2   I follow Watson's chronology (Watson 1991), however it should be noted that this chronology differs in some important respects from that of earlier scholars.

3   According to CUL MS Dd.v.64, *Ego dormio* was written for a nun of Yedingham Priory, near Pickering. *The Form of Living* addresses the anchoress Margaret Kirkby, who was possibly previously a nun at Hampole Priory.

4   Around 100 manuscripts remain extant (Watson 1995a: 5).

5   Quoted in Cré 85. Cré also examines the minute ways in which Misyn's translations of Rolle convey moments of qualification or criticism (87–97).

6   In addition to frequent qualifications within the *Scale of Perfection* (I, ch. 10; II, ch. 29), and *Mixed Life* (ch. 15), Hilton's shorter treatise *Of Angels' Song*, is wholly concerned with the problems raised by Rolle's advocacy of *canor* (spiritual song).

7   For example, *Jacob's Well, The Book of Vices and Virtues, The Desert of Religion.*

8   Of course these texts were also widely circulated within monasteries. A Latin translation of the *Scale* c. 1400, by the Carmelite, Thomas Fishlake, survives in eleven manuscripts.

9   These attributions carry differing degrees of authority. Roger Ellis and Annie Sutherland cast doubts on the *Cloud* author's authorship of *Benjmin minor* and *Discerning of Spirits*.

10   Lees suggests he may have been a member of the charterhouse of Beauvale in Nottinghamshire (477–779).

11   Watson and Jenkins suggest she was probably a nun (4). Gillespie supports a lay reading (196).

12   Rubric to ch. 86 of Sloane MS (Watson and Jenkins 415).

13   Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS Fonds Anglais 40; London, British Library MS Sloane 2499.

14   For much greater detail on these manuscripts and editions, see the invaluable bibliography in Watson and Jenkins.

15   Watson and Jenkins suggest that the visionary writings of Elizabeth of Hungary and Bridget of Sweden would have been known to Julian (3).

16   See the readings of this episode in Abbott 90–104, and Baker 1994: 86–106.

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CHAPTER 25

Late Medieval Italian Women Mystics

Armando Maggi

By "late medieval" we intend a vast cultural period extending from the late thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, from the formation of a female spirituality deeply influenced by Saint Francis's experience to the "living saints" whose spiritual gifts made them extremely popular and influential in the courts of the early Italian Renaissance. As Paul Lachance emphasizes, "even if it was not their exclusive domain" the Franciscan movement "dominated the spirituality" of late medieval Italy, which witnessed significant social, economic, and spiritual changes, primarily a strong participation of lay people in the life of the church (29). The boundaries of our study are thus less temporal than cultural. Women mystics of the Italian late Middle Ages share some fundamental similarities concerning (1) how they experience the divine, (2) how their insights are shared with others, and (3) how they place themselves in society. Let us summarize the main traits of these three basic facets.

1. In late medieval Italy, women mystics show a deeply personal apprehension of the divine, which manifests itself primarily in and through their body. For these visionaries, God is first and foremost Christ, the incarnate Word. God's humanity is the core of these mystics' experience. The sensorial perception of the incarnate Word's presence is a crucial element of late medieval mysticism. Smell and sight are the privileged senses through which the mystic enjoys her closeness to Christ's body, with a fundamental emphasis on the blood oozing from his open side. Christ usually presents Himself to His female interlocutor as He was in two key moments of His human biography: His childhood and His Passion. He appears either as a little child, often accompanied by His mother, or as the *Ecce Homo*. The mystic, however, doesn't limit herself to recalling Christ's existence according to the Gospel narratives. Her act of remembrance is a literal reenactment of Jesus' existence, which may lead her to enter and participate in the gospel scene. The mystical event is in fact a *mise-en-scène* in which she externalizes an inner apprehension, as the great late Renaissance mystic Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (1566–1607) will do during her long reenactments of Christ's Passion inspired by

St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* (see Chapter 28, this volume). The late medieval mystics' solo performances thus foreshadow the Jesuit form of "experiential" meditation, although a major difference is detectable between the two practices, in that the medieval mystic envisions her body both as the stage and the narrative represented on that inner stage, in sharp contrast with the late sixteenth-century mystics' representations, which even when externalized, as in the case of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, place the mind, rather than body, as fulcrum of their mystical staging.

Late medieval mystics' performances present two opposite forms: highly theatrical (fast movements and gestures; forceful monologues) or absolutely silent, immobile, and unresponsive to external stimuli. Both options are present, for example, in the incisive descriptions of Francesca Romana's ecstasies. The mystic is either Christ's interlocutor (He is a baby accompanied by his caring mother or a dying man supported by the distressed Mary Magdalene) or identifies with the crucified Savior. Being the locus of her spiritual insight, the mystic's body is able to bear exceptional abuse, as we read in the biography of Vanna of Orvieto (1264–1306), who once on Holy Friday lay on the ground and stretched her arms as if they were being jerked violently before being nailed on a cross (*Legend of Giovanna of Orvieto*, in Lehmijoki-Gardner 68). Her bones cracked and her joints snapped under an invisible pressure. The mystic's body often goes so far as to literalize a spiritual metaphor. Pierced by her Savior's love, the heart of Chiara of Montefalco (1268–1308) was literally perforated by one of the arms of His cross, as became visible after her death (Berengarius 23).

2. The transmission of these mystics' experiences is in most cases indirect. A male hagiographer (their confessor, most frequently) reinterprets their visions as segments of a biographical narrative. If her raptures have also external manifestations, the mystic's voice may surface as a quotation within the hagiographical text. If, on the contrary, her visions have an exclusively private character, the male scribe creates her inner dialogue with Christ, also thanks to the visionary's subsequent explanations, thus turning her into the main character of a religious fiction. However, numerous are the exceptions to this basic pattern. Often illiterate, the mystic may communicate her insights in the form of a dialogue with a male interlocutor who reports her words, either as literal transcriptions or faithful summaries. The most important example is Angela of Foligno's *Memorial*, which "documents the steps of her inner journey" (Lachance 20). For four years (c. 1292–1296), her confessor Brother A. met with her and jotted down what Angela dictated in her Umbrian dialect and then translated her words into Latin. Angela's complex analysis of mystical ascension thus results from her intense dialogue with her devout confessor, as one finds also in some of Catherine of Siena's literary productions. The extent of the male scribe's intervention in the formation of Angela's book has been the subject of an intense debate that, as Bernard McGinn underscores, has even led some scholars to the untenable conclusion that Angela never existed and that the Franciscan Spirituals put the text together in order to present "their view of the ideal lover of God" (McGinn 143).

3. These mystics' social identity has often a paradoxical character. Often cherishing their lay status, their existence blends a strong emphasis on isolation and dedication to private contemplation with a tireless involvement in the contemporary social and political life of the Italian city-states plagued by constant conflicts. Especially in Central Italy,

groups of lay penitent women, similar to the Northern European beguines, went by the name of *pinzochere*, *mantellate*, or *vestitae* (all signifying a usually grey "religious dress") and were affiliated to the Franciscan or Dominican order. Usually seen as widows who chose to live a pious life outside the cloister, they wore the religious habit without being nuns or tertiaries, did not necessarily take any vow, and thus "were ambiguously placed in the margin between the secular and religious worlds" (Luongo 37). Under the constant pressure of the church authorities, by the fifteenth century this hybrid movement came to identify with the Franciscan or Dominican Third Order. Apart from caring for the sick and poor and founding religious institutions, thanks to their powerful charisma several of these medieval women mystics also acquired an extraordinary didactic authority characterized by strong prophetic tones. Their teachings, however, have often an experiential, rather than an abstractly theological character.

Catherine of Siena's significant influence over the papacy and the political life in Tuscany is certainly the most famous, but not the sole example. Umiltà of Faenza (1226–1310), born into a noble family, was a married woman who, after the premature death of her two children, joined a monastery in the city of Faenza and after twelve years of complete isolation founded a new monastery in the same city and a second one in Florence. Umiltà has bequeathed us fifteen *Sermons* in which, speaking in the first person, she first recounts her own personal interaction with Jesus as a young boy (*Sermon* 1), whom she addresses in a prayerful discourse. In *Sermon* 6, however, the mystic states that her literary expression is nothing but a "stuttering in similes" (Simonetti 70). Another remarkable example is Margherita of Cortona (1247–1297), who after several years spent in a sinful life (she fled her father's house to follow a noble man by whom she bore a baby) became a Franciscan tertiary, founded a hospital for the poor, and finally lived isolated in a cell for many years. Despite her physical solitude, however, Margherita repeatedly intervened to bring peace to the troubled political life of her town.

To summarize this basic outline, we could say that the core of late medieval Italian women's mysticism lies in its fundamentally hybrid and paradoxical nature. The divine doesn't limit itself to visiting the mystic; it leaves its visible marks in and on her body, which becomes the stage of a religious performance and the textual evidence of that performance. The woman's mystical experience is thus either live recording or evidence of a past encounter with the divine. Although from a historical standpoint these visionaries' mysticism rests on a tension between lay and religious identity as exemplified in Catherine of Siena's unconventional life, political and social engagement is a fundamental constant of their religious experience. Finally, from a literary standpoint, their mystical message is conveyed through a variety of rhetorical means: hagiography, dialogue with a male religious, autobiographical narrative, or theological treatise. Their authorship, like their religious status, does not conform to any given model.

Given the limited space available in this context, we will approach this complex moment of western mysticism by dividing our analysis into two sections: the first and most detailed one will examine those texts in which, through a variety of rhetorical formats, the woman mystic theorizes a form of mystical theology; the second, much shorter section will deal with some of those texts, primarily hagiographies, in which the mystic's voice is either intermittent or entirely transmitted in the third person, as

typical of all biographical narratives. Some of the most original visionaries, however, such as Umiltà of Faenza and Catherine of Siena, blur this clear-cut distinction, given that their mystical profile is constructed through the interplay between the theological and the hagiographic genre.

Theological and Auto-Hagiographical Writings

Umiltà of Faenza: Sermons

A subtle dichotomy is detectable between the mystical sensibility conveyed by Umiltà of Faenza's mystical compositions and the two hagiographies, one in Latin (authenticated in 1332) and a second, longer one in Italian (written in 1475). These biographies offer some scant information about her life. The two biographies emphasize Umiltà's stern determination as abbess of the various institutions she founded, her ability to foresee the future and correct other's sinful habits, and her miraculous interventions in other nuns' lives. Born in 1226 into a noble family in the small town of Faenza, she was forced to marry but, when her husband fell seriously ill, he agreed to set her free so that she could embrace the religious life. Her restless search for the right place to pursue a contemplative existence found a first stable location when an uncle of hers offered her a private room in his house, where she lived alone in constant prayer and penitence. Her final destination was a small cell that her uncle built next to the monastery of Vallombrosa, where she spent twelve years. Under the Virgin Mary's order, she left the cell and founded the monastery of Saint Maria Novella close to Faenza. Later Saint John the Evangelist in a vision ordered her to found another religious institution, which she created in Florence (Simonetti xii–xiv).

A more nuanced self-portrait results from her writings, which have been divided into fifteen compositions, although at times they have no clear beginning or end and do not always have a homiletic character, as for example in *sermon* nine, which is a laud to the Virgin Mary written in prose and verses. Although they seem to address an actual, albeit unspecified, audience (*fratres* and *sorores*), Umiltà's *Sermons* transcend the strictures of their genre and investigate essential issues of Christian mysticism from both a theoretical and an experiential point of view. A recurrent theme is the "speech about divine love," which Umiltà analyzes in detail in sermons seven and eight (Simonetti 78). For Umiltà, this is a multifaceted expression because the act of speaking about the divine primarily means *to speak divine love*, which consequently turns the homiletic genre into the expression of a mystical insight. The physical senses perceive an indescribable sweetness that does not come from the intellectual apprehension of a concept, but from the verbal manifestation of Christ's infinite love. Although she mentions the fundamental importance of taming the flesh (Simonetti 80), Umiltà underscores that the sweetness of divine idiom reveals itself in the harmonious union of body and soul (Simonetti 84). "I am words," writes Umiltà, "you, who know truth, speak according to your will" (Simonetti 81–82). In this regard, it is significant that Umiltà's main interlocutor in her last sermons is St. John ("Oh evangelist, messenger of sweet love," sermon eleven), to whom she expresses a profound love and devotion (Simonetti 146).

The love that the fourth evangelist has implanted in her heart will never be eradicated, also because he has "married" her with a ring (Simonetti 147). Still suffering from a spiritual desolation that she described in detail in sermon ten, Umiltà begs St. John, to whom she is mystically married, to intercede with Christ so that He free her from her anguish. In Umiltà's sermon thirteen, the evangelist of the Word identifies with the "great mystery" of the soul's intimacy with God (Simonetti 168). In his gospel, Umiltà contends, John narrated many events, but he also "kept many others" for himself (Simonetti 171). She recalls that John was Jesus' beloved disciple and the Virgin Mary's "son," and thus was also the "eagle among all the evangelists" (Simonetti 158). Addressing him directly, in sermon thirteen Umiltà reminds St. John of what she already told him previously: she is totally committed to "conceiving" and thus quietly awaits the time of "giving birth" (Simonetti 172). Although she doesn't reveal the nature of this future "birth," we may infer that she refers to the "divine idiom" that, originating from Christ's love, emanates a profound sweetness in those who are able to utter it.

Angela of Foligno: the Book

In the opening section of the *Memorial*, the first of the two parts of Angela's *Book*, the Franciscan Brother A. explains how he became the transcriber of Angela's mystical experiences: "The true reason why I wrote as follows. One day the aforementioned person, Christ's faithful one, came to the church of St. Francis in Assisi, where I was residing in a friary. She screamed greatly while she was sitting at the entrance of the portals of the church" (Angela of Foligno 136). Being her confessor, the friar felt deeply ashamed of her unbecoming behavior also because other Franciscans rushed to see her shouting. "Wanting to know the cause of her shouts," the friar returned to Foligno, where Angela (1248–1309) lived, and "compelled her to tell me everything" because he wished to understand whether her amazing story was a demonic illusion or a divine enlightenment (Angela of Foligno 136–137). During her first conversation with the visionary, the friar learned that, during her pilgrimage to Assisi, she had been in a state of constant prayer. However, at the crossroad between Spello and Assisi, the Holy Spirit told Angela that He would accompany her only until the church of St. Francis, to whom Angela had turned for assistance. When she arrived at the church, while contemplating "a stained-glass window depicting St. Francis being closely held by Christ," she heard the Holy Spirit telling her that at this point He would withdraw his consolation from her (Angela of Foligno 141). This revelation was at once "bitter" and "sweet," in the mystic's words. Angela's *Book* thus opens with an indecent scream that signifies the paradoxical irruption of the divine as violation and abandonment. "Love still unknown, why? why? why?," these were the heartbreaking words that Angela screamed in the church (Angela of Foligno 142).

Her *Book* compromises two different texts: the *Memorial*, in which from 1292 to 1296 the Franciscan scribe reports, edits, and translates into Latin the insights that Angela utters in the Umbrian dialect; and the *Instructions*, which gathers the discourses and various teachings that Angela imparted to her followers, lay people and members

of the Franciscan Third Order, between 1296 and 1309, the year of her death. Angela's mysticism is under the aegis of Saint Francis's spirituality (see Chapters 19 and 21, this volume). The *poverello* is present throughout her mystical autobiography. In the *Memorial*, Angela describes thirty mystical steps, which revolve around three dynamic concepts: self-awareness, memory, and charity. For Angela, self-understanding identifies with a progressively sharper remembrance of the incarnate Word's sacrifice. The mystic is then compelled to translate this insight into action. The first twenty stages of Angela's mysticism can be divided into five sections:

1   The mystic became aware of her sinfulness and future damnation, and shed tears of penance. Devastated by shame, she prayed to Saint Francis "to find a confessor who knew sins well, someone she could fully confess herself to" and the saint appeared to her in the form of an elderly friar who reassures her (Angela of Foligno 124). The following day, she went to the cathedral of St. Felician, where she "saw a friar preaching, the chaplain of the bishop." To this friar Angela made a full confession, which gave her great comfort.

2   The mystic acquired a deeper sense of her spiritual flaws and recalled the pain that she had inflicted on others. She prayed to Jesus more intensely, and realized that she was responsible for his death on the cross.

3   She felt compelled to follow Christ in his complete poverty, passion and death, and thus wished to become free from all human ties. First her mother, then her husband, finally all her children passed away, which gave her great consolation, because she could give herself entirely to God, who would take care of them. As a consequence, her soul deepened her intimacy with the crucified Christ, who shared with her the pain of His passion and asked her to contemplate his open wounds.

4   At this crucial turning point, her soul entered the passion scene, felt "the sorrow over the passion suffered by the mother of Christ and St. John," and drank from the blood oozing from the Savior's side (Angela of Foligno 128). Christ's blood led her to a clearer understanding of His goodness and of the words pronounced during the *Pater Noster*.

5   After receiving a new form of faith from the Virgin Mary, the fire of divine love became so intense that Angela couldn't help but scream every time she heard the name of Jesus. She experienced sudden moments of such an intense spiritual sweetness that once she fell on the ground and became unable to speak. This is when she traveled to Assisi and shouted in the church because God had suddenly withdrawn from her. Her scribe clarifies that the twentieth phase is also the first he heard from the mystic when she tried to explain to him the cause of her unusual behavior.

The Franciscan friar adds that, unable to distinguish Angela's last ten mystical steps, he decided to assemble them into seven "supplementary" revelations. These final steps concern a progressive understanding of divine teachings and love. Whereas the fifth revolves around "the revelation of divine union and love," the sixth "contains the state of agony and veritable martyrdom she was in" because of her numerous physical ail-

ments and demonic assaults, and the seventh and conclusive one "surpasses anything conceivable or imaginable" (Angela of Foligno 135).

Angela's mystical experience stresses the tension between spiritual cleansing and inner sight of Christ's body. At the same time, it also underscores the fundamental need to externalize the inner apprehension of the divine in the attempt to harmonize the inner and the outer aspect of the human condition (see Walker Bynum 194). What exceeds and violates the mystic's psyche translates into excessive but necessary gestures that in essence reflect a religious insight (for instance, drinking the water with which she has washed some lepers' festering wounds and swallowing a "scale of the leper's sore [that] was stuck in my throat," [Angela of Foligno 163]). Angela sees herself more clearly insofar as Christ allows her to see his tortured body more sharply, and consequently this sharper vision demands a sharper gesture of self-denial in the here and now of her existence. On her way back to Assisi, Angela contemplated Christ's body on the cross, but in particular during that tormented journey back home the mystic was granted a close-up of the nails that "had driven a little bit of the flesh of his hands and feet into the wood" (Angela of Foligno 145). As a result, Angela was unable to stand any longer and had to lie on the ground, stretched her arms, and inclined her head on them. The small scale detached from the leper's sore recalls the small piece of flesh ripped off Christ's hands and feet. Both details are forms of metonymy. Both stand for an excruciating suffering, radical exile, and death. In both cases, Angela "swallows" and appropriates this insight.

As I pointed out earlier, according to the scribe the fifth supplemental step of mystical ascension concerns the revelation of divine union and love. It is at this pivotal stage that Angela reports a life-changing and unforgettable mystical experience. On Holy Saturday, she entered Christ's sepulcher, lay on top of his dead body, "kissed Christ's breast – and saw that he lay dead, with his eyes closed – then she kissed his mouth, from which… a delightful fragrance emanated" (Angela of Foligno 182). Then, she heard the corpse telling her: "Before I was laid in the sepulcher, I held you this tightly to me," without opening his lips or eyes. Angela's experience is extraordinary from more than one standpoint. First of all, it is a "complete *experientia*" because, given the central importance of sensorial perception in late medieval women mystics, it affects the mystic's five senses: she sees Christ's body; she touches and smells it; she kisses his mouth and hears his words (Vanelli Coralli 161). Moreover, the extraordinary value of this experience is enhanced by the fact that it takes place in the enclosed space of a sepulcher (Pozzi 146).

What has not been stressed, however, is that this love meeting presents Christ as a deceased human being. Angela repeats twice that his eyes were closed and that he spoke without opening his mouth. The Christ addressing the mystic is not the resurrected Jesus, but the corpse still lying in the tomb, which means that Angela experiences the fifth supplemental stage of her enlightenment as the physical act of loving the God who is no more and who loves her without returning her affectionate kisses and caresses. As Angela underscores, the dead Christ *does not look at her*. Nonetheless, he reveals to her that he held her in his arms *before* being laid in the sepulcher. Angela is granted the sensorial apprehension of a memory. This memory is the manifestation of Angela's mystical union.

If we keep this baffling event in mind, Angela's last stage of mystical ascension, which her scribe could not understand fully, becomes less cryptic. For Angela, to contemplate "the light, the beauty, and the fullness that is in God" identifies with a previously unknown realization: "I did not see love there. I then lost the love which was mine and was made nonlove" (Angela of Foligno 202). For Angela, "nonlove" does not equal "absence of love" or even rejection, but rather a "darkness" in which God, whose goodness is "too great to be conceived or understood," grants the soul the "most certain faith, a secure and most firm hope," in which "I recollected myself totally." The joy that the soul feels in this darkness, in this nonlove, is "totally unspeakable" (Angela of Foligno 203). "Speech is cut off," the mystic relates to her scribe, "when God is seen in darkness" (Angela of Foligno 204). Unlike her shouts of despair at the entrance of the church in Assisi years before, the soul's final silence in the darkness of God springs not from a sense of abandonment, but rather from her total oblivion of all human matters, including the "God-man," because now she is *in* the God-man. God's "unknown nothingness" is also the last of Angela's recorded *Instructions*, before the conclusive description of her joyful death (Angela of Foligno 315).

Catherine of Siena

Dialogue   Catherine's major opus, *Dialogue*, which according to the dubious hagiographic tradition was completed in only five days two years before her death, is a difficult, at times obscure and repetitious, analysis of the soul's quest for the perfect peace residing in "Perfect Truth," which the mystic experiences as a sequence of sermons delivered by God in the soul's "cell of self-knowledge" as responses to the soul's queries (27, 25). Referring to herself in the third person as Catherine Vigri does in *Seven Spiritual Weapons*, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) opens her hefty treatise on an autobiographical note: "I remember having heard from a certain servant of God that, when she was at prayer, lifted high in spirit, God would not hide from her mind's eye his love for his servants" (25). The Word explained this "servant of God" that the soul is united to God through the incarnate Word and those who have "drowned their own will" into his have become one with him (26). The fundamental link between the soul and the divinity is the Son's love. This introductory statement is in fact the core of Catherine's complex treatise.

Reacting to God's benign disclosure, the mystic feels encouraged to address four petitions to the eternal Father: the first is for herself, because Catherine wishes to suffer "to atone for the offenses my creatures commit against me," as God himself says; the second petition is "for the reform of the Church;" the third is "for the whole world in general, and in particular for the peace of Christians who are rebelling against holy Church;" the fourth was for a specific, but undisclosed, "case which has arisen" (29, 26). God's response to Catherine's four petitions represents the first part of the *Dialogue*, which in the second section returns to God's initial statement about love as the basic bond between humans and the divine. God's lengthy explanations are often concluded with third-person remarks on Catherine's emotional and physical reactions to these

divine teachings: "The fire within that soul blazed higher and she was beside herself as if drunk, at once gloriously happy and grief-stricken" (57).

The *Dialogue* is not a sprawling and digressive treatise, as it may seem, but rather a coherent examination of the relationship between the soul (Catherine as the "servant of God") and the Father. The long treatise is divided into two major parts, whose main focus is the search for God as a private experience (part 1) and as a universal quest shared by the church in its entirety (part 2). The first part is additionally split into two subsections. In part 1, subsection 1, the Father first discloses the source of his care for the soul and thus his willingness to listen to her needs; second, the soul formulates her four requests, which starts with her desire to suffer on behalf of the other (as the Father has opened to the soul's need for truth), then moves to a universal request for divine intervention (first the church, then the unfaithful Christians, and ultimately the "whole world"), and at the end returns to the soul's care for the other in the form of a specific request in favor of "her father," Catherine's confessor Raymond of Capua, author of the *Legenda maior*, the most important biography of the saint (55, 57). As a reply to her final petition for Raymond, the Father introduces the concept of "bridge," which stands for his Only-Begotten Son, through which the soul can reach her goal (Cavallini 171–176).

In part 1, subsection 2, the Father delineates the mystical journey that the soul must embark on to reach him. The soul's progress toward God opens with the fundamental image of the mystical bridge, to which Catherine dedicates a detailed analysis, which is also the longest and best-known moment of the *Dialogue*. According the Father, his divine bridge has three stairs. In particular, "two of them he [Christ] built on the wood of the most holy cross, and then third even as he tasted the great bitterness of the gall and vinegar they gave him to drink" (64). The first stair corresponds to Christ's feet; the second is the open wound on his side where the soul can contemplate his heart; and the third is his mouth. "At the first stair," God explains, "lifting the feet of her affections from the earth, she stripped herself of sin. At the second she dressed herself in love for virtue. And at the third she tasted peace" (65). After learning about this mystical bridge, Catherine asks about the role played by tears in the soul's passage to God. The Father clarifies that, although all tears come from the heart, they are divided into five kinds, from the "tears of damnation" of the sinful world, to the "sweet tears shed with great tenderness," and finally to the "tears of fire, shed without physical weeping" (161).

The second part of the *Dialogue* ends with the Father explaining the truth that it is the ultimate goal of the soul's mystical journey. In God's words, "three lights come from forth from me, the true Light" (184). Whereas the first light is for those "whose charity is ordinary," the second and the third "belong to those who have risen above the world and are seeking perfection." As far as the first light is concerned, God emphasizes the mutually enlightening relationship between the light of reason and the light of faith, which is the eye of reason's "pupil" (185). Thanks to this first enlightenment, the soul perceives her weakness vis-à-vis the temptations of sensuality. This awareness engenders a fundamental humility in the soul. The second light derives from a severe penance aimed at mortifying one's body. At this stage, however, pride is a major temptation, because the soul may look down on those who are not practicing similar forms of physical

humiliation. The third and final light is granted to the soul who considers herself deserving of all sorts of suffering and, knowing God's will, "clothes herself in it" and drowns "her own will in this light" (187–188). The consolation that the soul perceives in this state of grace, however, may be undermined by poor judgment, because "the more a soul loves what she has, the less she sees or is careful to discern with prudence where that thing comes from" (199). For in fact the devil may tempt the soul through a false enlightenment that does not increase the soul's search for charity, as all truthful divine consolation does.

The emphasis on the risks inherent in the soul's quest for virtue connects the first part of the *Dialogue*, centered on the soul, to the second, focused on the universal church, and first of all on the need for a radical renewal in its ministers. God first asks his servant Catherine to consider "the excellence and the great dignity" in which he has placed his priests who have the privilege of administering the Eucharist, which embodies God's "abyss of charity" (209). God, however, also insists, "as these ministers want the chalice in which they offer this sacrifice to be clean, so I demand that they themselves be clean in heart and soul and mind" (213). After God's detailed and out-raged examination of his ministers' sinful self-love and sensuality, Catherine begs him to be merciful to the world and his church. This heartfelt request leads to the sub-sequent section concerning God's unswerving providence that manifests itself through the history of salvation and is always present in the sacraments of his church. Even after the body's death, God explains, his infinite providence continues to care for the souls "who foolishly wasted their time" and now, unable to rectify their past, are purging themselves in purgatory (313). Linked to the theme of God's loving providence is Cath-erine's following request for clarification concerning the central virtue of obedience: how can the soul respond to God's unflinching support? The Father reminds his servant that the Word has restored the obedience destroyed by Adam's betrayal. He then mentions examples of perfectly obedient members of the church, in particular Saint Francis, Saint Dominic, and Thomas Aquinas (336–339). The *Dialogue* ends with Cath-erine's praise of divine unfathomable wisdom.

The letters   The collection of St. Catherine's almost four hundred epistles, a masterpiece of medieval literature, is best seen as the concrete application of the theological views expressed in the *Dialogue*. Her letters do not have a merely historical relevance, due to the extraordinary status of some of their addresses (for instance, popes Gregory XI and Urban VI; several cardinals; king Charles V of France; queen Giovanna of Naples; several Italian noblemen and politicians); they are also, and more importantly, powerful elaborations of the saint's mystical theology, which in the letters gives special emphasis to the central role of charity. As God tells her in section 148 of the *Dialogue*, "in this mortal life, so long as you are pilgrims, I have bound you with the chain of charity … I in my providence did not give to any one person or to each individually the knowledge for doing everything necessary for human life. No, I gave something to one, something else to another, so that each one's need would be a reason to have recourse to the other" (311). In God's words, St. Catherine understands that each member of society is dependent on others: "Also the cleric and the religious have need of the layperson, and the layperson of the religious." The body politic is thus, in St. Catherine's view, "a

mystical body" under the aegis of God's grace (Meattini 29). As a consequence, Catherine's social role has a distinctly apostolic connotation, which reminds us of St. Paul's (Ascoli 200–201).

Although, according to Raymond of Capua's hagiography, St. Catherine suddenly learned how to write thanks to divine intervention, she dictated most of her epistles to three of her followers (Barduccio Canigiani, Stefano Maconi, and Neri of Landoccio Pagliaresi). Catherine's disciples began collecting her letters while she was still alive because her written statements were perceived as precious samples of the young woman's sanctity. The first printed edition of Catherine's epistles came out in 1492 with the prestigious Venetian publisher Aldo Manuzio. Following a basic tenet of this classical genre, which finds in Petrarch's two collections titled *Familiares* and *Seniles* their most prestigious representatives in late medieval Europe, Catherine's letters combine suggestions and recommendations directed at specific addressees with universal moral remarks that in her correspondence acquire a distinctly theological character. In two famous epistles ("To Monna Rabe of Francesco de' Tolomei," Letter 120; "To Friar Raymond of Capua," Letter 272), Catherine offers a succinct summary of the *Dialogue*.

Catherine usually opens her missives with a relatively standard sentence: "I, Catherine, servant and slave of Jesus Christ's servants, write to you in his precious blood." This initial expression, which can be divided into two parts, works as a cogent synthesis of Catherine's spirituality. First, she presents herself as the one who writes without expressing her own will since she is the "slave" of God's servants. Similarly, in the first sections of her *Dialogue*, Catherine underscores that "murdering" one's own will through acts of penance and physical mortification is the foundation of a person's spiritual growth. Second, Catherine states that her words are composed in Christ's "blood," thus implying that Christ's purifying sacrifice and death is both the ink and the ultimate message of her epistle. It is in the name of this cleansing blood that, after this brief introduction, Catherine expresses her wish for the other's wellbeing and addresses the specific topic of her missive. In sum, the mystic's epistle stresses that its author is merely a function of its addressee's salvation. Catherine writes in order to glorify God through her care for the other.

Her desire is at times to see the recipient of her letter "drowning" or "bathing" in the crucified Christ's blood, because only if immersed in his blood will he or she receive the mystical qualities inherent in the Savior's blood (see McDermott 84–89). Writing to prison inmates of Siena on a Holy Thursday (Letter 260), the mystic comforts them by stressing that bathing in Christ's blood means keeping the image of his cross before their intellect's eyes so that it may reflect their flaws but also God's infinite mercy. Christ's blood is so sweet that it is able to heal all infirmities. In Letter 273, to her confessor Raymond of Capua, the image of being bathed in blood acquires a disturbingly literal meaning. She relates how in 1375 she had visited in prison a young Perugian, Niccolò of Toldo, who had been sentenced to death by the Sienese authorities because of his alleged seditious activities. Catherine consoled this young man and stood by him at the moment of his execution. Playing the role of the "comforter," the layperson who in medieval Italy was allowed to accompany the prisoner to the scaffold, she "placed his neck on the block and bent down and reminded him of the blood of the Lamb," and when his head was cut off she received it in her hands (Brophy 131, 134).

Catherine Vigri: Seven Spiritual Weapons

Catherine Vigri's *Seven Spiritual Weapons* (*Le sette armi spirituali*) is a primary example of a kind of hybrid writing that blends first-person experience and theoretical statement. It is at once a subtle dissection of fundamental diabolical temptations and a heartfelt autobiography that envisions the fight with one's inner demons as a central aspect of all human identity. This fascinating text is, moreover, a personal anthology of spiritual poetry and prose, which Catherine often uses to expand or comment on her insights. Born into a noble Bolognese family, Catherine (1413–1463) received her spiritual and literary education at the court of Ferrara (Pozzi and Leonardi 261–263). At the age of thirteen, she entered the lay community *Corpus Domini*, which resisted the religious authorities' request that it embrace the Augustinian rule in order to regularize its status. Felt drawn toward Saint Francis's spirituality, Catherine chose a Franciscan confessor. In 1431, Eugene IV's bull required that her community follow Saint Clare's rule. After a short excommunication, Catherine was selected as Mother Superior of the newly founded monastery.

Her *Seven Spiritual Weapons* (first composed in 1438 and then edited between 1450 and 1456) alludes to this dramatic moment of Catherine's life. The "sisters of the convent of the Body of Christ" being her primary addressees, in the preface Catherine underscores that she has written this "little book" because she feared God's reprehension if she hid what could "benefit others" (Vigri 3). Since to choose the path of virtue demands that we "be violent toward ourselves," with her book Catherine wishes to sustain those who are "molested by their will" and the "appearances" of the world (Vigri 4). Catherine offers seven "weapons" to "vivify" those who are engaged in this fierce battle: "diligence," "diffidence," "trust in God," remembrance of Christ's Passion (*memoria passionis*), awareness of one's mortality (*memoria mortis proprie*), remembrance of God's glory (*memoria glorie Dei*), and the authority of the Scriptures (Vigri 5).

To support her teachings, Catherine frequently mentions Saint Francis's writings (*Admonitiones*, *Regula bullata*, *Regula non bullata*), the popular *Little Flowers* and other biographical texts, and Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*. Humbly referring to herself in the third person as if narrating someone else's life, Catherine links fundamental moments of her autobiography to passages from the lauds of the mystic Jacopone of Todi, a staunch supporter of the Spirituals' cause. For example, her insight on man's nothingness vis-à-vis "divine and imperial majesty" follows a powerful quotation from one of Jacopone's poems on the unfathomable "annihilation" that opens "all doors" and leads to "infinity" (Vigri 22).

Catherine's detailed analysis of demonic temptations shows a remarkable knowledge of the human psyche. One of the devil's subtlest challenges, writes Catherine, is when he speaks a perfectly pious idiom. During a time when it was hard for her to obey her Superior's orders, the devil appeared to her in the form of the crucified Christ, who benevolently accused her of being a thief (see Vigri 17). Catherine understood that she had deprived Christ of her obedience because of her frequent "thoughts of infidelity." "How can I possibly prevent those thoughts from coming to me?," she asks him. The false Christ demands that she gives up her memory, intellect, and will. She must follow

her Superior's requests blindly without exercising her memory or intellect and keep her mind always focused on his cross. However, realizing that those disordered fantasies keep harassing her, Catherine concludes that the devil had appeared to her, because he wished to prevent her from confessing this temptation, which he had implanted in her mind (see Vigri 18). Catherine also dedicates inspired pages to the "dark night of the soul," during which God wishes to try her by withholding His love. This period of spiritual alienation comes to an end with the apparition of the Virgin Mary who allows Catherine to hold the baby Jesus in her arms (see Vigri 41). *Seven Spiritual Weapons* ends with a vision of the Apocalypse, which the mystic experienced in 1431. Catherine saw herself in a multitude standing on the right side of God. These people "cried out to God" and spoke "with great joy and pleasure some words that I will omit now" (Vigri 55).

Hagiographies

In this second, and more concise, section we consider those women mystics whose experiences and insights were communicated through biographical texts. We have already touched upon the interplay between hagiography and personal writing in Umiltà of Faenza. Similar considerations could apply to the two main hagiographies dedicated to Catherine of Siena: Raymond of Capua's best-seller *Legenda maior* (completed in 1395) and Tommaso Caffarini's *Legenda minor* (1396), an abridged version of Raymond's book, and *Libellus de Supplemento*, which is a collection of disparate texts spanning some fifteen years (1400–1416) and aim to provide additional information about the saint. "Shortly before Catherine died in April 1380," Jane Tylus writes, Raymond "was appointed general of the Dominican Order" and because of his demanding position he sporadically worked on his hagiography (Tylus 62). As Catherine's spiritual confessor for three years (1374–1377), Raymond knew the saint well and worked with her closely. Some of Catherine's most moving letters are for Raymond, whom she often encourages in the most challenging moment of his religious career.

Raymond's depiction of Catherine differs from the image resulting from her own writings in two main aspects. First, Raymond presents a young lady who wished to live a cloistered existence and was compelled to abandon her life of reclusion only after receiving a direct order from Christ. Furthermore, Raymond presents her political activity as essentially limited to Siena, thus de-emphasizing her extraordinary influence on the papacy and her journeys to Avignon and Rome, which are only mentioned in the shorter third part of the *Legenda maior*. Second, in Raymond's account, Catherine is a woman with incredible mystical powers. For instance, she resurrects her mother so that before dying she can benefit from the sacrament of confession; once at night, while traveling with others on a boat, terrible winds suddenly threaten to capsize the boat but Catherine prays in silence and they reach land safe and sound; she multiplies loaves of bread so as to feed the poor; Christ opens her chest, takes her heart out, some days later places a new heart inside of her and closes the wound, but leaves a scar, as her female disciples confirm. Raymond aims at delineating a second female Christ through an astute blending of the saint's biography and legends.

In the *Vita* of Umiliana Cerchi (1219–1246), we find episodes that are common to other contemporary hagiographies. After her husband's death, she wishes to spend her life in isolation, although she lives in the center of Florence. During one of her ecstasies, she falls in a state of catalepsies for two days and her brothers open her mouth with a knife fearing that she has become seriously ill (Pozzi and Leonardi 91). In the *Vita* of Benvenuta Bojanni (1255–1292), a Dominican tertiary born into a noble, we learn about her encounters with the Virgin Mother and her Baby Jesus, but also about her participation in the Passion, which traumatizes her so deeply that when she comes out of it she finds out that she had stained the veil she had worn to cover her face with tears of blood (Pozzi and Leonardi 188).

I would like to conclude with the *Vita* of Francesca Romana (1384–1440), because her biography and mysticism is a cogent synthesis of all the main issues discussed in this essay. Born during one of the most difficult moments in the history of Rome, Francesca is compelled to marry, but soon reveals an exceptional interest in the poor and the sick, and becomes very active in numerous hospitals, where she heals several people. Thanks to Giovanni Mattiotti, her confessor and author of the *Tractati* (1340), we have a detailed account of Francesca's intense mystical experiences. After a transitional period in which she stayed with other *oblates* who continued to live with their families, thanks to a divine intervention Francesca decided to found a new community in Rome (Pozzi and Leonardi 252). During a beautiful ecstasy (December 25, 1431) in which her body seemed to glow, Francesca sang a "sweet song" to the baby Jesus that the Virgin Mary allowed her to have for a moment (Armellini 47). Francesca contemplated the humanity of Christ that she was holding in her arms and realized that each aspect of his face corresponded to a positive quality. His nose, for example, signified the good inspirations and his ears the good inclinations. In a later vision (September 23, 1432), Francesca's body exuded a sweet fragrance and looked utterly "transformed" (Armellini 142). Transformation is indeed what the women mystics briefly examined in this essay experience in their life. Their bodies completely open to the divine call for transformation.

These women visionaries represent a transitional stage in the history of Christian spirituality. Their social status and their apprehension of the divine are unstable. Renaissance and baroque biographers of Catherine of Siena, for example, will be uncomfortable with her lay condition and will misrepresent her as a Dominican nun. The main problem of these women's spirituality, however, is the variety of their mystical experiences, which oscillate between a strictly intellectual insight and a purely physical manifestation. These women own and do not own their bodies and their biographies, which are often constructed by their male interlocutors. The intrinsically dialogical nature of their mystical experience is also the core of their mystical message.

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Nicholas of Cusa and the Ends of Medieval Mysticism[1]

Peter J. Casarella

What distinguishes "medieval mysticism" in the west from the mysticism of other periods? Certain trends regarding developments that took place between the mid-thirteenth and late fifteenth century are readily apparent from the preceding chapters. There was a turn to the vernacular, the emergence of new voices of protest and reform, an expanded participation of lay persons, expressed especially through new female spiritualities, and both a rise and eclipse of a medieval form of Platonic mysticism. When and how did this rich period of novelty end? What happened when that ferment subsided? What breakthrough, if any, allowed one to discern the crossing of a threshold to a new era? These questions bring us to the cusp of the Middle Ages and the beginning of a modern project. Since the 1980s, scholars have challenged and problematized the long held assumption of a dichotomy between a "Catholic" (in the sense of pre-modern) Middle Ages and a wholly Protestant modernity (see Chapter 27, this volume). This chapter goes one step further by investigating the very notion of an "end" of the Middle Ages as that concept has been deployed by a variety of thinkers, both Catholic and Protestant.

The eminent Dutch historian Johan Huizenga is a helpful starting point. When I first read the English translation of Huizenga's 1919 book about the forms of life and thought in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and the Netherlands, I knew that I had encountered a classic work but still had difficulty in grasping the reason for entitling the work *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Then in 1996 the University of Chicago Press published a much more readable and engaging edition of Huizenga's text with the newly translated title: *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. Only then did I realize that Huizenga's already sober metaphor of *Herfsttij* had been made even more pessimistic by the English translation from 1924. Apparently, the original translator was swayed by Huizenga's own concern immediately after publishing his masterpiece to hold in check the allusiveness of the original title and to further differentiate his work from that of his mentor, the illustrious historian Jacob Burckhardt.[2] The 1996

abridgement and retranslation restored the dual meaning of the original – both a beginning of a decline (with connotations of over-ripeness and fall) and a time of harvest, a period of abundance and an eager anticipation of the spring that must follow.[3]

This chapter thus takes as its departure point the dual meaning in Huizenga's title as applied to the medieval mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Along the way, it questions the bifurcation of the two meanings and investigates why scholars of the Middle Ages allowed it to impact the way we think about mystics and their place in history. In other words, some historians focus on the falling leaves in the autumn of the Middle Ages, and others on the impending spring. Only a few see, with Huizenga, that the two phenomena are necessarily intertwined.

These questions are inherently hermeneutical, for they deal with not only the spiritual content but also the method of study of the mystics. More basically, one could also pose the question, Why do scholars feel compelled to present the mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries at the end or at the beginning of a process of historical interpretation of which they were clearly not a part?

Marking the end of a historical period is an act of interpretation, an act so laden with subjectivity that two temptations arise at once. The first is to posit the essence of the subject in question as trans-historical, i.e., as receiving over time nothing more than new textures and hues. The second is to see each act of interpretation as an imposition from an alien epoch upon an ultimately indeterminable flow. In the latter, Heraclitean view, we learn mainly about our own time in marking past epochs. Modernity, like any era, is an epoch that frames the past in its own terms, but the modern way of enframing has been particularly disadvantageous to the rich harvest of the Middle Ages. We learn that the modern age is absorbed with what Heidegger called "The Age of the World Picture" (115–154) and that we have only just begun to consider what Rémi Brague aptly calls "the legend of the Middle Ages" (27–32). Modern periodization allows for an ever renewable artistry of shifts in mindset to satisfy our inner need for order and balance, for enframing the indeterminacy of historical reality as a picture with neat borders that we can grasp from our present viewpoint. There is more to this position than just the historian's pride at seeing more details than can be made visible in any big picture. It is really about our anxiety in a fundamentally restless and uprooted age to leave the past unordered. With respect to medieval mysticism, the two views – the essentialist and the pluralist – are not so very different in that they both have problems in seeing how to place the mystical experience meaningfully into history.

In this chapter, I focus on Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), also known as Cusanus. In most accounts, Cusanus is situated as a Neoplatonic thinker who breathed the air of late medieval mysticism (see Chapter 4, this volume). During nineteenth- and twentieth-century European history, there was a penchant for revisiting his thought because of its strong parallels to what was emerging as a broader genealogy of modernity. This chapter will show the connection between the quintessentially "mystical" element in Cusanus's thought and our own endlessly hermeneutical acts of periodizing the history of mysticism. My analysis will focus on just one text – *De visione Dei* (*On the Vision of God*), a self-consciously mystical treatise from 1453. Because of a letter he received from monks in the Austrian city of Tegernsee, Cusanus sought in this text to craft mysticism as a spiritual genre. The title of the work attests to Cusanus's concurrent

desire to make hermeneutics ready to hand, since the vision of God (*visio Dei*) must be read as both an objective and subjective genitive. At the heart of the meditation is therefore the interplay between (what Cusanus referred to as) the conjectural gaze from the infinite and our finite gazes. The particular interpretations of this text and, in particular, of the playful idea of a gaze will lead us back to the larger question of the search for the ends of medieval mysticism.

This chapter has three parts. First, I will examine interpretations of Cusanus's mysticism that periodize him at the cusp of the advent of modernity. In this way, we will see how historians who have examined the development of western mysticism have demarcated the boundary between medieval and modern. Second, I will consider three distinct interpretations of *De visione Dei*: one that reads it as a medieval text, one that highlights the problem of modernity seen through the lens of the text, and one that displays what we today might consider "post-modern" styles of thinking. Just as Cusanus played with the metaphor of vision, this essay plays with the notion of ends. In the conclusion, I lay out how the imposition of ends (in the sense of our *purposes* in studying the Middle Ages) is so closely related to the interpretation of what is taken to be the terminal point (the *temporal end* of the medieval period).

Nicholas of Cusa in the Modern Quest to Bring an End to the Middle Ages

In the early twentieth century, there was only marginal concern in the English-speaking world for connecting Cusanus's mysticism to what came to be known as the problem of modernity. If anything, during this period scholars highlighted his Neoplatonism as the feature of his mysticism that separated it from the less learned spiritual writers, but they never situated his thought within the problem of modernity. For example, in the historical appendix to her *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; 1961), Evelyn Underhill (see Chapters 33 and 34, this volume) briefly mentioned the German Cardinal in this way in order to extend the history of Ruusbroec's (see Chapter 22, this volume) influence into fifteenth-century Germany. There were only two mentions of Cusanus in the body of the work, both taken from *De visione Dei*. The latter concerned Christ as the Word of God humanified and human deified and came close, in her view, to the prayer of thanksgiving on the mystery of the Incarnation that is read each year at the Christmas Mass: "Since through the mystery of the incarnate Word, a new light of the eye of the mind is infused with your radiance, so that we, while knowing God visibly, are then enraptured by this [knowledge] into the love of things invisible."[4] For Underhill, Cusanus's meditation and the prayer of the Christmas liturgy sum up "the essence of mystical Christianity" (118–119). She was unperturbed by modernity as an epochal problem and therefore thought she could bridge the span of five centuries with a liturgically infused spiritual essentialism.

Underhill's essentialist approach continued to hold sway, even as scholars began to pay more attention to the content of Cusanus's sermons. For example, Ray C. Petry, in his still praiseworthy anthology, *Late Medieval Mysticism* (1957), published for the first time in the United States a translation of a sermon by Nicholas of Cusa. He presented

Cusanus as a bookend, in the same way that Wippel and Wolter would in their anthology of philosophical writings more than a decade later.[5] Petry's volume appeared one year after the publication of Rudolf Haubst's *Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues*, one of the first works to pay any attention to the mystical theology of the Cardinal, but still prior to the editing of the sermons in a critical edition by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences. Like Underhill, Petry presciently saw an emerging Christocentrism as the key to interpreting Cusanus.[6] And like Underhill, Petry was looking for the advent of a new form of the *vita activa* ("the active life") within a late medieval history of largely male monastic contemplatives, a narrative that he began with Bernard of Clairvaux. Cusanus was fittingly the penultimate selection. Catherine of Genoa's treatise on Purgatory, highly influential in the modern revival of the medieval experience of God, came last (see Chapter 25, this volume). In his introduction to selections from *On Learned Ignorance* and *On the Vision of God*, Petry treated the Cusan vision of Christ as a fundamentally eucharistic experience of life-giving bread and said, with clear echoes of Huizenga, "Cusa followed the vision celestial [of medieval contemplatives] into the harvest field of the world" (358).

Petry, a Protestant teaching at the historically Methodist theological faculty of Duke University, was attracted to what he termed "Cusa's secular priesthood" (20). Petry sought to recover aspects of the medieval tradition that were compatible with his own ideas of the reform of the church. As John O' Malley notes, the Catholic side of the early modern period has sometimes been overshadowed by the watershed event of the Protestant Reformation (1). Petry brilliantly highlighted Catholic forms of *reformatio* (reform) even before it became commonplace to search for seeds of ecclesial and spiritual reform before Martin Luther. Commenting further on Joseph Maréchal, Dom Butler, and other twentieth-century scholars who championed the experiential dimension of medieval mysticism, Petry was concerned mainly to show that there was, at the end of the Middle Ages, a timely world-oriented alternative to the standard model of western contemplative monasticism. He wrote,

> One aspect of the present anthology that speaks largely for itself is this peculiar equipoise of medieval contemplation and action with its major response, however admittedly a by-product, to human need in the name of the Divine. (22)

Petry found a compelling response to a modern quest for God in medieval contemplatives. He saw the medieval mystics as part of a general program of Christian reform accomplished through a new humanism. Ironically, Petry's attempt to bring medieval history into a post-medieval era also displayed a kind of gentlemanly reverence for traditional forms of monastic contemplation less evident in today's scholarship. For Petry and Underhill, then, the problem of what separates medieval from modern remains unthematized, but their silence does not mean that the problem was altogether absent. They saw Cusanus the mystic as a figure who belonged to a fairly timeless reservoir of medieval truths. They believed with rightful conviction that the spiritual testimony of such figures required urgent attention because their own age was largely devoid of contemplative truth and a spirit of reform.

One might think that the idea of *Cusanus* as the prototype of modernity therefore belongs to a much more recent and, well, modern current of thought, but this is not exactly the case either. The idea that the medieval Cardinal made a decisive contribution to some form of rupture that separates the Middle Ages from the modern period first arose mainly in his native Germany in an epoch when the re-discovery of pre-modern German sources for modern philosophical and theological innovations was beginning to gain ground. The label of "precursor" of modernity surfaced for the first time around 1847 with a number of important German scholars. In that year, for example, Franz Josef Clemens wrote:

> Who could miss the manifold similarities and points of contact with Kant's philosophy? . . . With respect to the more recent philosophy of identity and nature, I have no interest in highlighting the relationships and similarities with the teaching of Cusanus since they are perfectly obvious to everyone working in this field.[7]

Clemens also linked the philosophical influence of Cusanus to the thought of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), and Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). So for German thinkers like Clemens the idea of reading the history of modern European philosophy through the texts of the Cardinal from Kues had already been taken for granted by the middle of the nineteenth century. Since then, many layers of interpretation have accumulated, but this nineteenth century development gave a real impetus to the attempt to place Cusanus at the outer edge of the Middle Ages and the early beginning of modernity (Watanabe 19–25).

In the twentieth century, the image of Cusanus as a mystical precursor of modernity's worldliness came into even greater prominence largely through the influence of a philosophical school of interpretation developed by Herman Cohen (1842–1918), Cohen's celebrated student Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), and a student of Cassirer named Ernst Hoffman (1880–1952). The project began with the aim of defending the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in a new and more scientific key (hence "Neo-Kantianism"), but Cohen's modern framework for approaching the past quickly led to new developments. Hoffmann's 1927 seminar on Cusanus at the University of Heidelberg included as one of its students Raymond Klibansky. That same year, Cassirer published his impressive *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, which dedicated two chapters to Cusanus and his influence in Italy (1–72). Klibansky was intimately connected to this Neo-Kantian circle and even contributed an appendix to Cassirer's book (Thurner 18). Klibansky's legacy, however, cannot be seen as an endorsement of the Neo-Kantian interpretation. In 1928, he completed a dissertation in Heidelberg under the directorship of Hoffman on the twelfth-century school of Chartres (Thurner 19). Klibansky's research into the continuity of the Platonic tradition seriously called into question both the general thesis regarding Renaissance innovativeness supported by Jacob Burckhardt and the specific claim implicit in the Neo-Kantian retrieval that Cusanus set out to be the "first modern philosopher" (Watanabe 34).

In 2005 the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences announced the official completion of the complete philosophical and theological works of Nicholas of Cusa in a critical

edition. The project officially lasted from 1928–2004 and heralded Klibansky as its grandfather. This project of a modern critical edition was tied in its inception to a certain amount of healthy skepticism regarding the idea of Cusanus as a forerunner of modernity. The agenda was not to deny that Cusanus's legacy was an impulse for modern thought. If anything, the relevance of Cusanus to the modern world was repeatedly invoked as a legitimation for the massive effort; nevertheless, by documenting all Cusanus's sources from the past, no one would remain beholden to the idea that he created his modern-sounding ideas with the sole intent of forging novelty.

With regard to Cusanus's overall place in the history of western thought, the eminent Cusanus scholar Rudolf Haubst endorsed the notion of "a doorkeeper of a new era" (*Pförtner der neuen Zeit*). Haubst, too, was an influential editor of the project of the critical edition. The epithet "doorkeeper" signaled for Haubst a deliberate movement towards a new period without endorsing or even defining modernity. In other words, for the Germans the doorkeeper stands at the threshold of *eine neue Zeit* ("a new period") that may or may not be identical to the epoch called *die Neuzeit* ("modernity"). "This is a truly vivid image!" Haubst proclaimed (3). He explained that it shows Cusanus to have been at the very precipice of a new development and ready to welcome others across that threshold, even though Cusanus himself remarkably did not trespass the divide. Later, Haubst introduced another image, one that further displayed the concern for not granting Cusanus a visa to leave the Middle Ages. He likened Cusanus to a coachman, in fact, to the very coachman who transported the bulk of Cusanus's library back from Italy to his birthplace and anticipated retirement home in Bernkastel-Kues, on the still scenic Mosel River. Cusanus in fact died in Italy before he could travel back to Germany and harvest the riches of his accumulated wisdom. According to this image, Cusanus brought a wealth of new ideas up to the portal of modernity in order for his descendants to employ them as they wish. Haubst conceded that the image of the coachman falters because it fails to show that Cusanus himself deployed the books and ideas of the past to create new forms of thought and life within his own sphere of existence (3–4). An example is Cusanus's *The Game of Spheres* (1462–1463), an actual game with a small bowling ball that allowed the player to discover his or her place as an image of God in the sphere of life. So Haubst sharply distinguished the medieval Cusanus from the precursor to modernity only to admit that the former might not have disassociated himself altogether from the latter.

A more acute form of the same paradox can be found in Hans Blumenberg's monumental *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966). He linked modernity to the project of making possible human "self-assertion" and "worldly self-realization" in direct opposition to what he termed in a rather broad stroke the "theological absolutism" of the Middle Ages. Blumenberg argued that the epochal transition that accompanied modern self-assertion became necessary in the light of the anthropological restriction placed upon late medieval consciousness due to the all-powerful *and* capricious God of the nominalists. Blumenberg's overarching agenda was quite ambitious. He saw direct links between the tyranny of the late medieval God and Gnostic precedents that reached back to St. Augustine (see Chapters 13 and 14, this volume). More importantly, he pushed that thesis with unparalleled comprehensiveness in order, partly, to refute the growing Neo-Hegelian idea, put forth by Karl Löwith and others, that modern

secularism was a direct outgrowth of medieval theology. Blumenberg insisted that the transition be marked as a radical rupture, and he placed that rupture right at the point when Giordano Bruno ("the Nolan") transformed the valiant but (in Blumenberg's view) ineffective integrating efforts of the Cardinal from Kues ("the Cusan") into an atheistic program for a cosmology of infinite worlds. In this view, Cusanus is modern in spite of his efforts to resist the future. He unwittingly opened the Pandora's box of modern self-assertion.

Recent scholarship has criticized Blumenberg, both for not taking seriously the medieval heritage that shaped this period[8] and for the questionable placement of Nicholas of Cusa on the late medieval edge of a new threshold. The latter criticism is cogently laid out in Elizabeth Brient's elegant study, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (2002). Brient is no foe of the form of modern worldliness that Blumenberg championed. She defends a philosophy of worldliness and a theory of modern transitioning to worldliness (namely, that of Hannah Arendt), but she finds a serious defect in Blumenberg's philosophy and especially in his interpretation of Cusanus. Although she ultimately objects to the fact that neither Blumenberg nor Arendt can explain how modern science as a worldly project grounds itself in anything other than its own attempt at self-assertion, she finds a subtle and interesting difference between Blumenberg and Arendt:

> Blumenberg fails to fully appreciate Arendt's point, here, that the standard of utility inherent in the self-assertive activity of modern theory and fabrication is itself fundamentally incapable of providing a normative measure for that very activity. (Brient 84)

Modern science, she argues following Arendt, needs some sort of spiritual foundation that comes from outside the modern trajectory of worldliness. Brient's solution is to return to Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1327) (see Chapter 23, this volume) and Cusanus as figures who played a key role on the medieval side of the epochal threshold. In other words, writing Christ out of metaphysics had the effect of weakening the idea that infinity, as a cosmological principle, can lend structure, order, and meaning to the finite world. By any account, Giordano Bruno radicalized Christ and the cosmos. In daring to postulate infinite worlds, he was not logically bound to deny the incarnation, but his overall position was thoroughly consistent with the path towards the principle of worldly dislocatedness that followed in his wake.

Brient's analysis also implies there may be better guides than Blumenberg when it comes to placing Cusanus at the end of the Middle Ages. I therefore conclude this section with two other scholars who have thought through the problem of the end of medieval mysticism by delving further into the philosophical foundations of modern thought. In his *Passage to Modernity* (1993), Louis Dupré attempts to reverse the course that Blumenberg charted. Instead of laying the responsibility for modern self-assertion on the doorstep of Cusanus, Dupré argues that Cusanus actually corrected the nominalist theology of the late Middle Ages, even though "his synthesis contained too many problems to serve as a model for the new age" (188). Like Blumenberg, Dupré is intensely focused on the coming of a rupture at the end of the Middle Ages: "Cusanus was probably the last thinker to reunite the theocentric and anthropological forces that had

begun to pull the medieval synthesis apart" (186). Dupré's overall image of Nicholas's thought is laudatory. He maintains that the Cardinal from Kues proposed, at the very least, the seeds of a possible synthesis of what became torn apart: learned ignorance, perspectival knowing, and a humanistic religion grounded in the faith of an Incarnate One. Instead of a hurried coachman or the wary opener of a Pandora's box, Dupré presents a thoroughly medieval character telling us to follow the yellow brick road to a modern future. For Dupré, there is in Cusanus's thought a clearly discernible path to a new beginning, even though there are barely surmountable obstacles along the way and no realistic possibility of getting to the promised land.

In *The Darkness of God* (1995), Denys Turner likewise questions the very enterprise of looking at the medieval tradition through a typically modern lens. His reading of medieval mysticism is truly provocative.[9] Turner questions whether, in the tradition of medieval negative theology, there ever existed anything comparable to the modern discourse of religious experience. Although he does not focus on Nicholas of Cusa in his book, Turner considers a way of thought that carried much influence within Cusanus's very own circle of friends. Turner focuses on the largely ignored but extremely prolific work of Dionysius the Carthusian (1402/3–1471), sometimes labeled the last scholastic. He was a close companion and conversation partner of Nicholas of Cusa. What Cusanus penned in *De visione Dei* is undoubtedly the fruit of these conversations, since Cusanus's work was intended as a polemic against another Carthusian, the Austrian monk Vincent of Aggsbach (c. 1389–1464). Turner places Denys the Carthusian chronologically and intellectually at the point of rupture between medieval and modern. Turner focuses on the legacy of the *via negativa* (the way of negation) in the medieval tradition of reading Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*. He writes,

> There is, then, something of the character of a "last stand" about Denys' [the Carthusian's] mystical theology. He wrote at a point very late in the Middle Ages where it was possible to perceive rather clearly what was happening; but it was both too late to prevent it, too early to see that preventing it was no longer possible. What Denys [the Carthusian] perceived was something about the disintegration of a unified "mystical theology" into the fragments of a theology which is no longer "mystical" and a theologically irrelevant "mysticism." That is what the evidence of his "canon" had begun to show, though it is much easier to see what that canon shows from the way it extends into later ages. For, as I have said, those in whom the "mystical" tradition continues from the fifteenth century to our day can be seen unambiguously to be what in Denys' list few were: "mystics," no theologians. And, it may be added, it is within the fragmentations of the mystical and the theological, of loving and knowing, of experience and speculation that we today, scholars or practising Christians, generally stand. Where the Middle Ages end, we begin. (224–225)

We cannot understand the end of medieval mysticism by bracketing ourselves. Turner's reading of how the fifteenth-century Carthusian presaged the disintegration of a mystical theology that remained true to the intentions of the Areopagite is illuminating. The separation of a subjective mysticism from its objective sources in doctrine and from the encounter with the Word of God was barely visible on the horizon of the fifteenth

century. Only a few prescient thinkers in the fifteenth century saw the problem for what it was. Today one would be remiss not to give an account of its effect.

On the Vision of God: Discerning Nicholas of Cusa's Path to Mysticism

The discourse of fragmentation is something that Dupré and Turner hold in common with contemporary theologians of diverse backgrounds. The idea of fragments displays a unity that has been lost as well as the possibility of a new integration (Dupré 221–253).[10] We turn now to Nicholas of Cusa's meditation from 1453 on the vision of God. Does Cusanus offer fragments to reconstruct a new synthesis? Consider this representative passage:

> Trusting in your infinite goodness, I tried to undergo a rapture so that I might see You who are invisible and the unrevealable vision revealed. How far I got, You know, not I. And your grace, by which You assure me that You are incomprehensible, is sufficient for me [2 Corinthians 12:9]; and by it You raise up a firm hope that under your guidance I may come to ultimate delight in You. (Hopkins 214)

This passage from Chapter 17 of *De visione Dei* highlights the openly experimental nature of the meditation. Cusanus had already entered into debates in earlier works about whether the image of seeing God applied to present Christian experience, but in this treatise he decided to write about a new set of issues with a new clarity and style.

There is hardly one way to read the text of *De visione Dei*, for it was written to be pondered by means of a new method of learning that attended to multiple vantage points, somewhat akin to the way in which an aesthetically inclined Italian of the mid-Quattrocento might look at the human figure, or a work of art, from different perspectives. Here I will examine three central issues that have been treated at great length by other scholars: (1) the way in which Cusanus reads himself into the fifteenth-century debates about mystical theology; (2) the question of human freedom; and (3) the question of a liturgical selfhood. I will then relate all three of these issues back to the question of the "ends" of medieval mysticism.

The Tegernsee monks and the controversy about mystical theology

Cusanus sent the manuscript of *De visione Dei* to the monks at the monastery in Tegernsee with visual aids. The monks were familiar with Vincent of Aggsbach's attack on Cusanus's early theology, though granted that Vincent had praised his greatness and considered him an expert in the *via illuminativa* (the path of illumination), even if he strayed in the *via unitiva* (path of unity). Furthermore, they were aware that Vincent had lumped Cusanus together with Jean Gerson (1363–1429) for intellectualizing the path of mystical theology. This is where Dionysius the Carthusian's concern about the distintegration of the Areopagite's vision matters. The lived interpretation of the genre bequeathed by Dionysius the Areopagite was, for Vincent, affective: "mystical

theology is a bedarkened elevation of the mind unto God, without any guiding or accompanying reflections" (Hopkins 14).[11] We know from correspondence that the monks at Tegernsee requested Cusanus's own response to the attack. *De visione Dei*, therefore, should not be viewed as a dialectical response or an isolated poetic discovery, but rather as part of a conversation that came out of an Austrian monastery.

What position did Nicholas take in the dispute? In sum, Cusanus joined himself with Gerson in defending the intellectual heritage of the Areopagite's mystical theology, a defense that certainly did not please Vincent. The formulations that he used to discuss the role of the intellect within mystical theology are not derived from pre-existing manuals. In the correspondence, Nicholas stated that there could be no complete suspension of the operation of the intellect in the path of union through love (*non linquendo intellectum*). Knowledge accompanies love; it is the intellectual or cognitive component necessary for love. This interplay between and interweaving of the fulfillment of the intellectual and affective dimensions of life is well summarized by Bernard McGinn:

> The intellect, as Cusanus concludes in Chapter 16, is not satisfied by understanding something, because any act of understanding a thing by its nature is finite, not infinite. He also insists that intellect cannot be satisfied by something intelligible of which it is totally ignorant. Rather, "only the intelligible which it knows to be so intelligible that it can never be fully understood can satisfy the intellect." (2006: 43–44)[12]

McGinn closes his summary with an appeal to Cusanus's dialectical understanding of hunger and satiation, a metaphor probably based on Eckhart. According to Cusanus, our never-ending desire for God is like a hunger that can only be satisfied by a meal, "which, although continually eaten, can never be fully consumed, because being infinite, it is not diminished by being eaten"[13] (see McGinn 2006: 43–44). In other words, knowledge accompanies love as the goal of what together intellect and affect strive with "never-ending desire" to attain.

Nicholas uses the metaphor of seeing to meld the process of intellectual apprehension to the theme of divine Sonship already developed in *De docta ignorantia* ("On Learned Ignorance," 1440) and *De filiatione Dei* ("On Divine Sonship," 1445). In this final stage of the trajectory, the identity of seeing and being-seen is connected to loving and being-loved in an absolute sense because of their coincidence in a triune God who embodies and offers love (see McGinn 2006: 48). Cusanus writes: "You offer yourself to any of us looking on You as though You receive being from us, and You conform yourself to us so that we will love You more the more You seem like us" (Hopkins 198). Cusanus avoids scholastic categories of stages of knowing, or even a strict dialectical reading of the categories of Dionysius the Areopagite, by positing a self-involvement of the seeing intellect in the total grasp of an incomprehensible reality. The reality of the incomprehensible is circumscribed and interpenetrated by the metaphor of divine omnivoyance. The seeing of God by the mystic is not just perpetual in a temporal sense. In a manner that can be likened to Gregory of Nyssa's (see Chapter 11, this volume) notion of *epektesis* (perpetual progress), seeing includes the process of striving here and now and also extends into the beatific vision (McGinn 2006: 49). The seeing of God (in both the objective and subjective senses) is so intensively infinite in its capacity that finite

distinctions between knowing and loving God become stages on a path to learned igno-rance. For Cusanus, God, as the divine reason, is lovable and, as divine love, is intelligible. Accordingly, he maintains, there is neither *ratio* (discursive reasoning) nor *intellectus* (intelligibility) beyond the wall of paradise wherein the God of the mystics dwells.

At the same time, the *transumptio* ("leap") from *ratio* and *intellectus* to union cannot be one of an affective path shorn of the creative fruits of inward vision since *intellectus* is itself the inner vision of the mind. Cusanus appeals here to a logic of the incarnate Word, a theme already signaled above by Underhill and Petry. The encounter with the person of Christ is neither affective nor intellectual: it is the personal source of the gift that comes from faith and makes the *transumptio* possible. Whatever speculative insights are contained in this treatise, the monks at Tegernsee are still enjoined to prac-tice what they have read and seen in their *lectio divina* (private meditation on Scripture) and beyond. All of this leads me to agree with McGinn that Cusanus was able to provide, perhaps for the first time in the history of Christian mysticism, an account of the Chris-tian life that integrated divine invisibility, the face-to-face vision promised in scripture, and divinization understood as filiation (2006: 42).

The drama of finite and infinite freedom

Cusanus has thus recovered three elements: the transformation of unknowability into invisibility, a dynamic and "progressive" notion of a beatific vision, and the gift of divine Sonship. The spiritual dynamics of vision is thus one way in which these fragments might come together in a possible synthesis. There is also the drama of the created freedom as it is grasped through the contemplation of the vision of God. One could note in this regard that the entire text of *De visione Dei* is written as a prayer. In particular, Nicholas states in an artful passage in Chapter 7 that even attracted the attention of the Neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer: "And while I am quietly reflecting in this manner, You, O Lord, answer me in my heart with the words: Be your own and I will be yours."[11] In other words, the response to Blumenberg about the modern problem of human self-assertion needs to be examined in light of the Cusan reappropriation of the notion of a human person as one who responds to a prior initiative of grace. Cusanus came to this issue with his typical creativity. Just as Cusanus eschewed a merely dialectical opposition between intellect and affect, so too did he try to change the discourse about divine power and human freedom. Thinking about selfhood in terms of prayer is actu-ally a novel way to enter into the issue of the *potentia absoluta Dei* (God's absolute power). It changes the terms of the debate as framed by scholastic theology. The ques-tion of human and divine freedom, which spawned the kind of nominalism that vexed Blumenberg, was not the question posed by the monks at Tegernsee. In the practical sphere of petitions to the divinity, Cusanus opened up a new realm of the dialogue between human and divine freedom.

This position is impossible to categorize in terms of either the essentialist construc-tions of Petry and Underhill or the modernizing tendencies of Blumenberg. It draws heavily from a monastic conception of interiority typical of the Middle Ages even as it thematizes the conflict between a finite and infinite will that consumes modern and contemporary thinkers. The Cusan turn to the subject is not self-assertion. It is rather

self-affirmation and at the same time an openness to the world based on a new spiritual awareness: "O God, you have led me to the place where I see Your Absolute Face to be (1) the natural Face of every nature, (2) the Face which is the Absolute Being of all being, (3) the Art and Knowledge of everything knowable" (Hopkins 145). Looking at the Face of God, the Cusan contemplative sees a self more deeply within and *thereby* becomes more deeply engaged in the world as world. For Nicholas worldliness and transcendence support and enliven one another.

A liturgical self

The third way into the multi-layered text of *De visione Dei* begins with Cusanus's own vernacular discourse about the invisible God and was partly provoked by a posthumously published article by Michel de Certeau entitled "The Gaze" (1987). De Certeau builds upon the fact that Nicholas sent the monks at Tegernsee an actual image of the face of Christ that appears to gaze at the viewer regardless of one's standpoint. This image figures God's omnivoyance, Cusanus opines. Nicholas advised the monks to undertake an experiment in the form of a para-liturgy. It begins with the simple act of looking at the icon of God from multiple angles and then imagining the idea of an all-seeing divine gaze that is both attractive and embracing. The experiment then moves to a group activity and finally to a theological synthesis. Cusanus explains:

> Moreover, if while fixing his sight upon the icon he walks from west to east, he will find that the icon's gaze proceeds continually with him; and if he returns from east to west, the gaze will likewise not desert him. He will marvel at how the icon's gaze is moved immovably. And his imagination will be unable to apprehend that the gaze is also moved in accompaniment with someone else who is coming toward him from the opposite direction. Now, [suppose that] wanting to experience this [phenomenon], he has a fellow-monk, while beholding the icon, cross from east to west at the same time that he himself proceeds from west to east. And [suppose] he asks the approaching brother whether the icon's gaze moves continually with him. Thereupon he will be told that the gaze is also moved in this opposite manner; and he will believe his fellow-monk. And unless he believed, he would not apprehend that this [simultaneous opposition of motion] was possible. And so, through the disclosure of the respondent he will come to know that that face does not desert anyone who is moving – not even those who are moving in opposite directions… And while he considers that this gaze does not desert anyone, he sees how diligently it is concerned for each one, as if it were concerned for no one else, but only for him who experiences that he is seen by it. This [impression] is so strong that the one who is being looked upon cannot even imagine that [the icon] is concerned for another. [The one who is pondering all this] will also notice that [the image] is most diligently concerned for the least of creatures, just as for the greatest of creatures and for the whole universe. (Hopkins 115–117)

De Certeau's analysis begins with the dynamics of the gaze set forth by Cusanus in the *praxis devotionis* ("the activity of devotion") described in the Preface to *De visione Dei* just cited. The monks knew ritual processions, and the movements described by Cusanus imitate their externality while looking to a new form of theology of walking, gazing, and exchanging viewpoints. The experiment begins, like all monastic devotion,

with the contemplative gaze being directed to God. God looks back, and the one gazing receives in the process a more profound awareness of self. Movement changes the practice and introduces dynamism.

The disclosure of the respondent is critical for understanding the meaning of the entire performance. It echoes Isaiah 7:14, which translated from the Vulgate signifies: "Unless you believe, you will not understand" (McGinn 2006: 40 n. 54). Hence, the monks are not simply contemplating in motion but conducting an almost geometrically structured exchange of what lies in their hearts. The conjunction of motion and rest leads the reader back to the idea of a God who can orchestrate this mathematical symphony by virtue of loving all creatures equally and totally. How can one bring together into a synthesis this admittedly idiosyncratic approach to the spiritual life? Nicholas's point is that the practitioner must try it for him- or herself, a seemingly modern orientation that will at the same time reinforce the value of the traditional ritual. Cusanus's mystical theology is thus based upon a concrete path, the walk within the liturgical choir of the soul. Such a transformation cannot be accomplished by either emotional longing or rhetorical play with metaphors. McGinn, echoing De Certeau, captures the novelty:

> Willingness to share wonder and to believe one's brother expressed in the implied question, "You too?" is at the root of Cusanus's mystagogical exercise . . . It is only on the basis of such asking, hearing, and believing that we, that is, each member of the community of faith, begin to grasp with amazement (not rational understanding) the experience of being seen by an infinite and omnipresent gaze. (40)

The intercommunion of wonder is at the heart of the liturgical formation of the self and vice versa.

The three issues just surveyed – mystical theology, finite freedom, and liturgical formation – are interrelated. Alone each one gives us new insight into how Cusanus can and cannot be placed at the end of the Middle Ages. Together they contribute three different optics for a broader understanding of how a remarkably creative thinker of the fifteenth century could work through the spiritual issues of his day by drawing upon treasures both old and new.

The Sense of an Ending: Final Considerations

We return now to the question of the two kinds of ends. In writing about the temporal end of medieval mysticism, scholars inevitably try to make sense of the wisdom of the mystics of the Middle Ages and explain how that has been eclipsed in our own times. Thresholds are inevitable. The problem of positing a threshold is hard to avoid if one does not want to make essentialist claims, such as those implied in the interpretations of Petry and Underhill.

The same issue arises when scholars look at the Middle Ages from the other side of the supposed divide. Writing about Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (see Chapter 28, this volume), Dupré opines:

> Certainly, their affective, subjective language substantially differs from the objective, Neoplatonic one of Eckhart, Ruusbroec, and their fifteenth century disciples. Yet their worldview remains unaltered, and they illustrate spiritual life's independence of the new cultural environment. Neither Teresa nor John had to confront the full challenge of modernity. (230)

Dupré is arguing that the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century pass through modernity in terms of their affective discourse but remain bound to a core spiritual vision no different from that of the mystics of the fifteenth century. In this essay I have emphasized how readers of late medieval mysticism so often invoke the standard of confronting what Dupré calls "the full challenge of modernity," often without an overt awareness of its presence or consequences. Here a plausible judgment is made about what counts as the passage from one epoch to another.

This epochal reflection brings us back to the question of how the hermeneutical process of ending the Middle Ages is linked to a search for the purpose of reading mystical texts. I have shown that Cusanus's mysticism, as presented in *De visione Dei*, has at least three goals, if it is understood as signaling the "end" of the Middle Ages: (1) to serve as a speculative counterpoint to Vincent of Aggsbach's overly practical and overly affective manualism; (2) to serve as a meditation that can be claimed as the theological balancing act in the midst of an impending epochal transition to modern worldliness and loss of transcendence; or, (3) to help the monks experience the presence of God through a practice of everyday life, i.e., a late medieval *Devotio moderna* that speaks to our post-modern times. There is wisdom in each of these three overlays, even though no one of them alone captures all that is in the richness of the text. All three lines of interpretation could be mapped onto present discussions about the relationship of spirituality, human self-determination, mysticism, theology, exegesis, and liturgy.

This study of the fifteenth century mirrors our search right now for spiritual wisdom. In that mirror, we see the completion of a transition from grand narratives like Blumenberg's quest to legitimate modern self-assertion to a search for a concrete path – like that suggested by De Certeau – experienced through a matrix of much more manageable reference points. Why has there been a cultural transition within the study of mysticism from the grand narrative about the eclipse of the pre-modern God to the smaller story about the practices of everyday life? Is this just true of the study of mysticism? These are very fascinating questions that need to be examined in the light of the lively discussion today of the spiritual condition of the contemporary age and its relationship to a broader historiography of Christian thought. But they are also ones that will have to be addressed on another day.

Notes

1   This chapter was given as a lecture in a lecture series associated with the 40th anniversary of the Program of Medieval and Byzantine Studies at the Catholic University of America and reworked for publication. I would like to express my gratitude to the medievalists at Catholic University for the invitation and generous comments.

2   See Aston.

3   See Peters and Simons.

4   Underhill cites the Latin text, which is translated above: "Quia per incarnati Verbi mysterium, nova mentis nostrae oculis lux tuae claritatis infulsit: ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur," in *Mysticism*, 119.

5   See Wolter and Wippel.

6   On this point Petry influenced H. Lawrence Bond, who became the major disseminator of the theology of Nicholas of Cusa for a new generation of scholars in the United States. See, for example, Bond's edition, *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*.

7   Clemens, 161, as cited in Meier-Oeser, 1.

8   See Cole and Vance Smith, and Aleksander.

9   See, for example, Kent Emery's review of this book. Emery endorsed with Bernard McGinn, whom he invokes, a historically accurate reading of how what moderns call subjectivity was treated under other names in certain medieval theological discourses. This recognition does not detract from Turner's thesis, in my opinion.

10   Cf. Tracy.

11   This genre is nicely summarized in Coolman.

12   *De visione Dei*, ch. XVI, Hopkins 205.

13   Ibid.

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Mysticism and Modernity

The Protestant Reformers on Mysticism

Dennis E. Tamburello, O.F.M.

Since the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation, Protestant thinkers have often judged the relationship between the Reformers and mysticism to be completely negative, in large part because mysticism has often been defined as a "Catholic" phenomenon, hence deemed incompatible with Protestantism. Such prejudices against mysticism reached a certain peak in the writings of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), whose ideas continue to be influential to this day. Among the grounds on which Ritschl condemned mysticism were individualism, quietism, and elitism (112). But his sharpest critiques were that it was a form of works-righteousness and that it claimed an equality between the mystic and God (593–594).

Leaving aside the curious point that the theology of most recognized mystics does not fit Ritschl's profile, this article will explore the historical evidence that classic Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, took a positive stance on mysticism in significant ways, if always with a distinctively Protestant tone. As other articles in this volume have attested, arguments about this question depend heavily on one's definition of mysticism. I shall follow the understanding of mysticism sketched by Bernard McGinn in the first volume of his *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. McGinn discusses mysticism using three rubrics: "mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God" (xv–xvi). I shall apply each of these rubrics to the mystical elements that I see in the works of Luther and Calvin. My aim is to show that on balance, these Reformers did not so much reject mysticism as they adapted their understanding of it to their own theological and religious agendas.

For the first rubric, McGinn refers to the classic study by Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element in Religion* (see Chapter 33, this volume). Von Hügel speaks of three elements of religion: the institutional, the speculative, and the mystical. The mystical

element, which von Hügel insists must never be isolated from the other two, is the experiential dimension of religion, where "religion is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed, is action and power, rather than either external fact or intellectual verification" (1:53). McGinn's comment on von Hügel's schema has particular relevance for our study of Protestantism and mysticism: "No mystics (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced 'mysticism.' They believed in and practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism), that is, religions that contained mystical elements as parts of a wider historical whole" (xvi). If no Protestant defined him-or herself as a mystic in the sixteenth century, no Catholic did either. Therefore, to dismiss a priori a mystical element in Protestant theology, as Ritschl and others did, seems misguided.

Although the term mysticism was not coined until the seventeenth century, it describes a key goal that Christians have always had: the encounter with God. This encounter is not seen as an isolated peak moment, but rather, to move to McGinn's second rubric, as a "process or way of life" Everything that both leads up to and flows from this encounter deserves to be called mystical (McGinn xvi). This too is relevant to our study, as Protestant authors often had an acute awareness of encountering God in all aspects of life, not just in prayer and worship.

Finally, McGinn speaks of mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the *presence* of God: "the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God" (xvii). Put simply, the word mysticism describes an intimate experience of God's presence and power in a Christian's (or other religious person's) life. Although Protestantism often rejected – quite explicitly – speculative forms of mystical theology, there is no question that its classic authors had a powerful sense of the presence[1] of God in their lives and in the lives of their respective Christian communities.

Medieval definitions of mystical theology, which are most relevant for a study of the Protestant reformers, often focused on the experience of *union with God.* Jean Gerson (1363–1429), for example, defined mystical theology as "experiential knowledge of God attained through the union of spiritual affection with Him" (64–65). Gerson's definition expresses a major distinction that we need to note before launching into a review of the Reformers: affective vs. essential union. An affective notion of union speaks of becoming spiritually one with God through love and conformity to God's will. In contrast, an essential notion of union sometimes speaks the daring language of losing one's own identity and becoming absorbed into God, as if (note the qualifier) there is no longer a distinction between God and the self. McGinn points out that if we define mysticism in this second sense, there are actually very few mystics in the history of Christianity (xvi).

Even those few mystical authors who spoke of an essential union rarely intended to argue for an unqualified identity between God and the believer. If there was any kind of identity, it was claimed to be by grace and not by nature. Even so, *any* language of union that implied identity was anathema to Protestant authors. At bottom, this was because identity-language posited more of a likeness than an unlikeness between the sinful believer and God, and Protestantism has traditionally emphasized the great

distance between God and the human. This did not, however, stop Protestant authors from speaking frequently of union with God, albeit with different emphases from those of their Catholic counterparts.

One other distinction that is worth noting concerns the modality of mystical experience, which can be placed on a spectrum. At the one end is contemplative mysticism, understood as an experience of intimacy or unity with God that is usually reserved for a spiritual elite. This kind of mysticism often involves extraordinary experiences such as trances, ecstasies, and the like. At the other end is what this writer likes to call "ordinary mysticism," an experience of intimacy with God in and through everyday piety and Christian living. From the start, Protestantism has leaned towards this latter pole.

At the present time, a scholarly consensus on the Protestant Reformers' relationship to mysticism remains elusive. I maintain that there is both continuity and discontinuity between medieval and Reformation conceptions of mysticism. The continuity is strong enough to make it legitimate to speak of a genuine mystical dimension in classic Protestant thought. Indeed, much of the most recent research on Protestantism and mysticism has acknowledged that "an evangelical theology and a mystical theology need not be mutually exclusive" (Nugent 1986: 654).

One final point before we begin our survey of the Reformers: As McGinn points out (xiv), we have no direct access to the experience itself, but only to the written records that have come down to us. So, our arguments will be focused primarily on an understanding of texts, not on judging the extent to which the Reformers were themselves mystics.

History of Scholarship

Until recently, to speak of the Reformation and mysticism was to enter a minefield. From the mid-sixteenth to around the mid-twentieth century, the lines were sharply drawn. Protestant scholars saw mysticism as unevangelical and a form of works-righteousness, and thus as exemplifying the worst aspects not just of medieval Catholicism but of the very essence of Catholicism. Catholic scholars, in turn, tended to reduce the Reformation to doctrinal heresy, scarcely taking notice of the genuine spirituality that was evidenced in the life and writings of the Reformers. Both sides took Luther, Calvin, and other reformers to represent a sharp break with the medieval church and as having initiated the modern world.

Ritschl, whose ideas we encountered earlier, was only one voice in the chorus that dismissed Catholic notions of mysticism and spirituality as incompatible with evangelical doctrine.[2] The assumption shared by these authors was that mysticism was "always the same" (Harnack III, 433) – that is to say, based on the premise that humans could actively seek union with God through works of love and contemplation. These theologians, Harnack included, accepted Ritschl's verdict on mysticism as focusing on the likeness between believers and God, and denying or minimizing the devastating effects of sin. They also generally assumed that in rejecting these qualities of mysticism, the Reformers in effect rejected mysticism *in toto*. As evidence of this, they pointed not only to the Reformers' critiques of Catholicism but also to their criticisms of the "radical"

Reformers – a diverse group that rejected any cooperation of the church with civil rulers and magistrates, in contrast to Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, who are often called "magisterial" Reformers. The so-called radicals were also known for their great emphasis on personal experience and direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. These qualities led Luther and Calvin to characterize them as enthusiasts who were a danger to both church and society. Luther branded them with the name *Schwärmerei*, which evoked the image of a swarm of bees.[3]

There is no question that in terms of church politics, Martin Luther represented a break with medieval Catholicism. When at the Diet of Worms in 1521 he stood his ground against the church, rejecting the authority of the pope and declaring his conscience to be captive to the Word of God, he was setting the stage for the modern notion of the rights of individual conscience, as well as unleashing the forces of social revolution. The latter effect was seen almost immediately in the Peasants' War (1524–1525) and numerous other violent outbursts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Whether, in fact, Luther and the other major Reformers represented a complete break with medieval spirituality is another matter. In the middle of the twentieth century, the pioneering work of Heiko Oberman prompted a new assessment of Luther, and in turn, other Reformers. Oberman spoke not of stark discontinuity, but rather of "forerunners of the Reformation" and "the harvest of medieval theology," expressions that became the titles of two of his books. Oberman challenged the conventional views among Protestants that the late Middle Ages was a period of "decline" in spirituality and that "reform" started abruptly in the sixteenth century. He argued on the contrary that there was a good deal of vitality in the late medieval period, and that the call to moral reform was very much alive before Luther came on the scene. Furthermore, Luther himself was in continuity with medieval spirituality in certain key respects, not the least of which was his attraction to the experiential rather than the speculative focus of mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, John Tauler, and the anonymous author of the *Theologia Germanica*. No less a scholar than Walther von Loewenich (1903–1992), who had argued in 1929 that Luther's theology of the cross was completely antithetical to mysticism, printed a partial retraction in the fifth edition of his book on this subject in 1967, acknowledging that Luther's Christ-mysticism "is not really so far removed from that of a Tauler," and "the mystic also lives by faith and by grace" (222).

Dividing history into periods has always been controversial. In some respects, it can be argued that Luther was a medieval figure, in that he was still struggling with medieval questions (e.g., how is one saved?). Recently, historians have begun to speak of the period as "early modern" history, which embraces roughly the late fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries (MacCulloch xxi). Thus, instead of seeing the sixteenth-century Reformers in isolation from their predecessors, successors, or Catholic contemporaries, they are being seen more and more as part of a continuum, and scholars are more prone to speak of division in a more nuanced fashion.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Of all the sixteenth-century reformers, it is probably fair to say that Martin Luther reflected most consciously and explicitly on the question of mysticism. Part of the

reason for this is that he spent a considerable number of years as an Augustinian friar. Luther initially embraced speculative mystical theology, only to reject it utterly. Nevertheless, most scholars would recognize that there was a strand of mysticism that never completely disappeared from his works. This is most evident in his understanding of faith and his way of describing how the Christian is united with Christ.

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 to Hans and Margaret Luther. Although his parents were peasants, his father came to achieve a modest amount of success as a businessman. The Luthers had high hopes that their son would achieve a higher status than they. (Little did they know how famous he would become.) They wanted him to become a lawyer, get married, and raise a family – and no doubt hoped that he would support them in their later years. Martin was by all accounts a dutiful son, and also a religiously sensitive one. In July 1505, shortly after he began the study of law, he was caught in a severe thunderstorm. Struck with terror, he promised to become a monk if his life was spared. This seemingly rash promise makes more sense if we consider that Luther had a potentially fatal accident a few years earlier and also suffered the loss of a dear friend. In a stunning reversal of his plans, he entered the Augustinian monastery at Ehrfurt in 1505.

It was here that Luther's religious training decisively collided with his religious scrupulosity. Having been taught to believe that God would offer grace to those who "did their best," Luther went into a downward spiral, doubting that he could ever do enough to please God. His spiritual director, Johann von Staupitz, urged him to follow the mystical path of surrender, but Luther did not find God approachable. He could only see a God whose justice was expressed as wrath against sinners – until he began to study St. Paul's statement in the letter to the Romans that the just person shall live by faith. That experience, often called the "tower experience" because he experienced it in a tower at a cloister in Wittenberg, opened his eyes to a completely different view of God's justice:

> There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. (LW 34:336)

It was from this point that Luther gradually came to see himself at odds with the teaching of the church.

The catalyst that ultimately led to a showdown was the indulgence controversy, which erupted in 1517. People were being told that buying indulgences could bring about the remission of sin, which collided head-on with Luther's newly rediscovered belief that salvation was completely by grace alone through faith. Luther was in fact right that the way the indulgences were being preached was a violation of church teaching. Unfortunately, his call for a debate on this question was only met with resistance. Rome quickly turned the issue into one of submission to its authority, but by that point Luther had become convinced that the only authority was scripture. This led to his rejection of other church teachings and practices, such as the authority of councils and the use of Latin for Mass. In 1521 Luther was formally excommunicated. There

were several efforts over the next twenty years to reconcile Luther and his followers with Rome, but all of them failed.

Luther had thus made a clear break with Catholicism. Or had he? The specific question before us is whether Luther's relationship to mysticism changed radically as a result of this shift in his understanding of justification. A study of the texts suggest an answer of yes and no.

The tower experience itself has often been described as mystical (Nugent 1991: 559). Certainly, the language Luther uses – of feeling like he was born again and had entered paradise – evokes a sense of a powerful encounter with divine grace. If mysticism expresses a direct consciousness of the presence of God, and if it has serious impact upon one's way of life, then this experience would seem to qualify.

Luther himself did not use the word "mystical" to describe the tower experience, but he often used mystical language in his writing. Luther's earliest publication was a translation of the anonymous mystical text *A German Theology* (*Theologia Germanica*), for which he wrote a laudatory preface in 1516 and again as late as 1518. Luther declared that "[n]ext to the Bible and Saint Augustine no other book has come to my attention from which I have learned – and desire to learn – more concerning God, Christ, man, and what all things are" (54). Luther also was attracted to the work of the fourteenth-century Dominican mystic Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361) (see Chapter 23, this volume). In 1516 he wrote some marginal notes to Tauler's sermons.

Luther scholarship generally claims that Luther was not so much influenced by these sources as that he found them congenial to his own emerging theology. And what did Luther find attractive in Tauler and the *Theologia Germanica*? In his 1968 study of Luther, Jesuit scholar Jared Wicks pointed to four themes where Luther felt kinship with Tauler: (1) Tauler's stress on God's working in humans in a way contrary to their own wishes; (2) Tauler's emphasis on human passivity in relation to God; (3) Tauler's stress on the presence of Christ in the Christian; and (4) Tauler's rejection of human self-confidence (145–150). According to Wicks, Luther found in Tauler a confirmation of his own spiritual program, which rejected all self-reliance, trusting instead completely in God's grace (151). However paradigmatically "Protestant" the Reformers may have made this, this was in fact a strong theme that ran through other medieval mystics, such as Bernard of Clarivaux, with whom Luther was also well acquainted (see Posset).

It needs to be pointed out that Luther did not read Tauler uncritically. When Tauler spoke of the presence of Christ, he often used the language of a divine spark in the soul (*synteresis*). Although Luther initially had embraced the idea that the *synteresis* could be a point of contact with redeeming grace, as he worked through the implications of his new understanding of justification, he quickly distanced himself from this view. Thus, in his marginal notes on one of Tauler's sermons in 1515 and 1516, he replaced *synteresis* with faith, believing that the former could lead to Pelagianism (WA 9:99; see Ozment 240). Around the same time, in his *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516), Luther stated,

> For they said that since the will has this *synteresis*, "it is inclined," albeit weakly, "toward the good." And this minute motion toward God (which man can perform by nature) they imagine to be an act of loving God above all things! But take a good look at man, entirely

filled with evil lusts (notwithstanding that minute motion). The Law commands him to be empty, so that he may be taken completely into God. (LW 25:262)

Even so, in the same lectures as well as in later works, Luther continued to use some of the mystical language he found in Tauler. For example, in his comment on Romans 3:7, he spoke of acknowledging ourselves to be "inwardly" what we are "outwardly" – i.e. sinners who have no righteousness before God (LW 25:213). This language of the inner and outer person was common in Tauler's sermons.

Luther's attraction to the *Theologia Germanica* ran along similar lines. He especially liked its discussion of the "old person" (Adam), representing disobedience and arrogance within us, and the "new person" (Christ), representing obedience and life with God (see *Theologia*, ch. 14, 78). The *Theologia* also used the metaphor of the outer and inner person – the latter being in union with Christ – while insisting that this union is brought about totally by God and not by human power (96–97).

Luther favored the sermons of Tauler and the *Theologia Germanica* partly because they were written in German, but mostly because they focused on religious *experience* rather than speculation. Of speculative mysticism, Luther did not have anything positive to say after 1517. In his famous 1520 treatise, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther attacked *The Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume), claiming that "he is downright dangerous, for he is more of a Platonist than a Christian... if I had my way, no believing soul would give the least attention to these books" (LW 36:109). A statement recorded in the *Table Talk*, in Fall 1533, was even more direct:

> The speculative learning of the theologians is altogether worthless. I have read Bonaventure on this, and he almost drove me mad because I desired to experience the union with God with my soul (about which he babbles) through a union of intellect and will. Such theologians are nothing but fanatics. This is the true speculative theology (and it's practical too): Believe in Christ and do what you ought. Likewise, the mystical theology of Dionysius is nothing but trumpery, and Plato prattles that everything is non-being and everything is being, and he leaves it at that. This is what mystical theology declares: Abandon your intellect and sense and rise up above being and non-being. (LW 54:112)

What was unacceptable to Luther in Platonic and Neoplatonic mysticism (see Chapter 4, this volume) was its idea that the human being (more specifically, the soul) could come to a union with the Absolute through a process of purification, illumination, and perfection. Luther's doctrine of justification involved necessarily a rejection of any notion of "cooperation" with grace. After this theological breakthrough, Luther opposed the idea that union with God could in *any* sense come about through human effort, most often described in terms of love, even if that love were seen as grounded in or motivated by grace. If, as Luther believed, the Christian could attain union with God, that union was brought about totally by God's work. Thus, in describing the condition for the possibility of union with God, Luther called his hearers not to look to human love, but rather to God's overflowing mercy to sinful humanity, perfectly expressed in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Any understanding of mysticism that respected these

boundaries remained acceptable to Luther. This explains his ongoing admiration for Tauler and the *Theologia Germanica*. With the exception of the notion of the *synteresis*, Luther found these sources to be in harmony with his conception of the Christian life.

With regard to mystical themes, the two areas where they were perhaps most evident in Luther's later years were his understanding of faith and the related conception of union with Christ. Luther defined faith in a decidedly mystical fashion. It was not a speculative but an experiential reality. For example, in his *Lectures on Galatians* he stated, "if it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance of the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself" (LW 26:129). In the same passage, Luther described faith as a sort of "knowledge or darkness that nothing can see. Yet the Christ of whom faith takes hold is sitting in this darkness as God sat in the midst of darkness on Sinai and in the temple" (LW 26:129). The image of darkness, expressive as it is of the apophatic tradition, was one that appeared frequently in the German mystical tradition.

Luther believed that faith was not just a subjective feeling but yielded a genuine union with Christ: "Faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated" (*Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:168). Luther frequently used bridal metaphors, which were common in the writings of the medieval mystics, to express this unity: the Bridegroom is Christ and the Bride (the sinner) is united with him in faith. A famous example is in Luther's 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, where he insists, faith "unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery . . . Christ and the soul become one flesh" (LW 31:351). What is important to notice here is that in Luther's understanding, this "uniting" happens completely because of grace, and not through any process initiated by or assisted by human cooperation. At the same time, Luther was emphatic that this presence of Christ engendered a real transformation in the Christian's life. Again in the Lectures on Galatians, he wrote,

> Christ and faith must be completely joined. We must simply take our place in heaven; and Christ must be, live, and work in us. But he lives and works in us, not speculatively but really, with presence and with power. (LW 26:357)

In recent years, a new Finnish school of Luther's theology has emerged, represented especially in the work of Tuomo Mannermaa. On the basis of statements about faith and union like the ones we have just reviewed, Mannermaa and his colleagues insist that Christ is truly present in faith; in fact, "[t]he Lutheran understanding of the indwelling of Christ implies a real participation in God and is analogous to the Orthodox doctrine of participation in God, or *theosis*" (see Braaten 25). This view clearly departs from the majority of Luther scholarship, which has traditionally insisted that Luther's theology cannot *really* be mystical because of justification being *extra nos*. The Finnish school argues to the contrary that although the source of justification is *extra nos*, this does not mean that it is without internal effect. Justification for Luther was not purely forensic but brought about a genuine transformation of the believer.[4]

Luther believed that this experience of union with Christ spilled over into love of God and neighbor. While he rejected the idea that *caritas* is salvific, he saw love as an inevitable *effect* of the working of grace. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, he described this as follows: "Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly " (LW 31: 367). Luther delighted in pointing out that, because God does not need our love to justify us, "we should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor" (LW 31:366). If, as McGinn maintains, mysticism involves a "process or way of life," Luther's belief that union with Christ in faith spilled over into love of neighbor was in some sense a mystical notion.

Scholarship on Luther and mysticism remains divided, but there is a growing consensus that the earlier negative judgments need at the very least to be modified. Luther's theology was nothing if not experiential, and it focused on an experience of the grace of God that he often described in terms of our being united with Christ. Some scholars have gone so far as to compare Luther's evangelical theology to that of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila (see Nugent, 1986; 1991), based on its strong experiential component. Luther may have rejected speculative mysticism, but he did not reject mysticism as a reality of Christian experience.

John Calvin (1509–1564)

John Calvin was a second-generation Reformer who built upon the work of Martin Luther and became known as one of the great synthesizers of Protestant thought. His conscious relationship to the medieval mystical tradition was not as strong as Luther's; nor do we find as many instances of the word "mystical" in his writings, although we do find a couple. Only in recent years has Calvin scholarship begun to speak positively of a mystical dimension in Calvin's life and thought. Calvin, like Luther, was a man deeply enmeshed in religious experience.

Calvin was born in 1509 in Noyon, France. His father, Gérard, was a lawyer who worked for the cathedral chapter. Initally, Gérard hoped for his son to serve the church by becoming a priest. Later, he changed his mind and sent John to study law. Calvin, unlike Luther, did complete his law degree, but he discovered that his real interest was in the study of the ancient classics. When his father died, he turned to this pursuit. His first book, in fact, was a commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*.

Between 1532 and 1534, Calvin became sympathetic to the Protestant cause. Calvin never gave an explanation for this, except cryptically in an autobiographical preface to his 1557 *Commentary on the Psalms*, where he spoke only of a "sudden conversion" from papal superstition to sound doctrine (C.O. 31:21–22). From this time on, he shifted his attention to a different kind of classical text: the scriptures. He continued to see his vocation as writing, and he looked for a quiet place where he could retire to a life of scholarship. He felt no desire whatsoever to become a reformer who would be

in the fray of church life and politics. In 1536, however, on his way to his chosen new home in Strasbourg, he was forced to make a detour to Geneva. This detour was to change his life forever.

It was in Geneva that Calvin met the reformer William Farel. Farel was familiar with Calvin's work. (Calvin had already published the first edition of his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion.*) Farel pleaded with Calvin to remain in Geneva and help with the Reformation. Calvin declined, explaining that he was a scholar, not a reformer, and that he was not of the right temperament. At this, Farel fired back that this invitation came from God and if Calvin rejected it, God would curse his life of scholarship. Calvin was struck with fear and agreed to stay.

This incident is important in terms of Calvin's relationship to mysticism. Although he is not generally regarded as being as religiously sensitive as Luther, Calvin was in fact a person of deep religious sensibilities. This encounter with the sacred was one based more on fear and awe (Rudolph Otto's *mysterium tremendum*), but it definitely fits McGinn's definition of mysticism as an experience of the presence of God that had a major impact on one's way of life.

With the exception of a brief interlude in Strasbourg, Calvin would spend the rest of his life in Geneva, attempting to reform the inhabitants of the city so that their moral and spiritual lives would conform to the gospel. His program of reform was rigorous, and it has often been described as harsh, but Calvin was convinced that the gospel was a transformative social power, and he therefore did not hesitate to move beyond preaching to concrete oversight of people's lives. In this respect he was different from Luther, who was largely content to preach the Word and to leave its effects in God's hands.

Calvin has often been stereotyped as a cold dogmatist, who had no interest in Christian experience. A close look at his writings, however, does not justify this conclusion. Following the approach we took with Luther, we will look at Calvin's historical relationship to mystics and the mystical tradition, and then at mystical ideas that appear in Calvin's works, considering whether or not they are identified as such by Calvin. Two of the most prominent places where we find such ideas are in Calvin's notions of faith and of mystical union – the same places we find them in Luther.

When Calvin referred to mystical authors and writings, it was often with disapproval. For example, in a letter to the Reformed congregation in Frankfurt in 1559, Calvin made a reference to the *Theologia Germanica*, telling his readers to "flee like the plague all those who try to infect you with such excrement" (C.O. 17:442, translation mine). Like Luther, he also was sharply critical of Pseudo-Dionysius. In the *Institutes*, he stated:

> No one will deny that Dionysius, whoever he was, subtly and skillfully discussed many matters in his *Celestial Hierarchy*. But if anyone examine it more closely, he will find it for the most part nothing but talk. The theologian's task is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable. (1.14.4)

At the same time, however, Calvin showed a great appreciation for mystics such as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. Like Luther, Calvin was interested in these writers more because they were compatible with his theological views than because of their

specifically mystical ideas. Yet he actually had more in common with mystical theology than he himself may have realized.

While Calvin never used the word *synteresis* in his writings, he did speak of two endowments of divine light in human nature that could not be destroyed even by sin: the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of the divine) and the conscience. The former he took to be an awareness of God's existence, and the latter an awareness that God's will must be obeyed (C.O. 47:6). Because of sin, these endowments resulted in nothing more than superstition and corruption, because they had no power to lead us to understand God or to obey God's will. Nevertheless, Calvin saw them as a point of contact with grace. This was clear in his use of the image of the scriptures as "spectacles" that clear up the otherwise confused knowledge of God that these endowments give us (*Institutes* 1.6.1). Calvin thought that such knowledge, rather than serving as a foundation for a natural theology, only served to render us inexcusable before God (1.5.14). Thus, Calvin rejected the salvific significance of these endowments in a way similar to Luther's rejection of the *synteresis*.[5]

Calvin's understanding of faith was very similar to Luther's in that it had to do with trust and divine acceptance, rather than with merely intellectual knowledge or assent. In the *Institutes*, he defined faith as follows:

> Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (3.2.7)

Calvin preferred to talk about God's benevolence or mercy rather than God's will. He remarked that thinking about God's will can be frightening; if we stress knowledge of God's benevolence, "we shall more closely approach the nature of faith; for it is after we have learned that our salvation rests with God that we are attracted to seek him." (3.2.7) Later in the *Institutes*, he added, "the knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension" (3.2.14).

This experiential concept of faith connected to the broader notion of piety that Calvin introduced at the beginning of the *Institutes*: "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces" (1.2.1). Calvin was interested not in dry intellectual speculation but with promoting a relationship with the living God. Reading this definition of piety in relation to McGinn's three rubrics of mysticism as the experiential element of religion, a process or way of life, and an attempt to express direct consciousness of God's presence, we can recognize here an expression of a kind of mysticism of everyday experience, although Calvin did not explicitly name it as such.

One of the major themes running through Calvin's works is union with Christ. Calvin himself twice called this *unio mystica* (mystical union) (see *Institutes* 3.11.10). Nevertheless, much scholarship on Calvin has taken pains to deny that his conception of mystical union had anything in common with medieval notions. Wilhelm Niesel, for example, remarked in 1956 that Calvin never taught "the absorption of the pious mystic into the sphere of divine being" (126). This is true, but it assumes that all mysticism involves an "essential" union with God. Calvin would indeed reject this as vehemently as Luther did, but as explained earlier, that is not the only way to conceive of mystical union.

To be clear, we must note that Calvin never clarified what he meant by the term *unio mystica*, nor did he consistently use the adjective "mystical" with great precision throughout his works. By mystical union he may simply have meant a union that is secret or mysterious. At other times, he used the word mystical to mean figurative or spiritual. Nevertheless, when he spelled out his understanding of union with Christ, he did so in ways that were strikingly similar to the language used by certain medieval mystics, particularly Bernard of Clairvaux.

As we saw in Luther, Calvin's conception of union with Christ flowed directly from his understanding of faith. For Calvin, the Holy Spirit brings the elect, through the hearing of the gospel, to faith; and in so doing the Spirit engrafts them into Christ (Tamburello 86). This image of engrafting, which evokes the vine and branches metaphor from John 15, was a frequent one in Calvin; in fact, it was his favorite image for describing union. Calvin also used some of the same images for union as Bernard of Clairvaux had. For example, he occasionally used bridal metaphors, which were primary in Bernard's writings. For Calvin, this metaphor correlated with Ephesians 5:31–33, where St. Paul referred to Adam's exclamation in Genesis 2 that Eve was "flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone":

> When Paul has said that we are flesh of the flesh of Christ, he adds at once: "This is a mystery." For Paul did not mean to tell in what sense Adam uttered the words, but to set forth under the figure and likeness of marriage the holy union that makes us one with Christ. (*Institutes* 2.12.7)

Once again it is important to emphasize that in using such metaphors, Calvin did not mean to imply that union was in any sense the product of human effort. It was completely the work of the Holy Spirit.

One other significant difference between Calvin and Bernard is that, while the latter applied the bridal metaphor specifically to contemplative experience, Calvin never expressed more than a passing interest in contemplation. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul spoke of being taken up into the third heaven, Calvin did not disparage Paul's experience, but remarked that such experiences are best left unspoken (C.O. 50:137–138). Calvin had no respect for the contemplation that took place in the monasteries of his day, which he associated with idleness (*Institutes* 4.13.10). For Calvin, union with Christ was a fact of everyday Christian existence, not a phenomenon confined to monasteries.

Calvin was perhaps more thorough than Luther in spelling out the nature of union with Christ. Occasionally Calvin would speak of the believer sharing the "substance" of Christ, but by this he never meant an essential notion of union. Rather, he was referring to a union that happened by the power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin rejected any notion of a crass mixing of substances between humans and God in the strongest possible terms. If this union was spiritual, it was nonetheless not figurative:

> Christ is not outside us but dwells within us. Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us. (*Institutes* 3.2.24)

Still, Calvin was loath to get overly specific when defining union with Christ. He often spoke of the union being mysterious or a secret. In one of his letters, he stated, "How this [union] happens far exceeds the limits of my understanding, I must confess; thus I have more of an impression of this mystery than I strive to comprehend it" (C.O. 15:273, translation mine). Calvin was more concerned that we "feel" Christ living in us, than that we can articulate the nature of that communication (C.O. 51:227).

Medieval mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux usually described union with Christ in relation to love. Luther and Calvin, however, usually described it in relation to faith, to make it clear that it was the effect of God's grace and not of human effort. But this did not mean that love had no function. Just as Luther saw love as an inevitable effect of faith, so too did Calvin. We have already seen that for Calvin, faith induces reverence and love of God (piety). Calvin believed that this had to flow directly into love of our fellow human beings: "We must at all times seek after love and look toward the edification of our neighbor" (*Institutes* 3.19.12).

In some ways, Calvin was much clearer than Luther about the place of love in the Christian life. Calvin spoke of a twofold grace (*duplex gratia*) of Christ: the grace of justification and the grace of sanctification (*Institutes* 3.16.1). The former had to do with righteousness, the latter with regeneration. The two graces were, in Calvin's view, bestowed simultaneously. While justification was total and consisted of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, sanctification was always partial; both were an effect of union with Christ. Calvin was tireless in proclaiming that sanctification was a lifelong process, and that love of neighbor was one of the primary fruits of repentance.

One area where Calvin focused a lot of attention on union with Christ was his treatment of the sacraments. He defined baptism, for example, as "the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children" (*Institutes* 4.15.1). Similarly, he spoke of the Eucharist as "a help whereby we may be engrafted into Christ's body" (4.17.33). His metaphors about union, including engrafting, communion, participation in Christ, etc., appeared frequently in his treatment of the sacraments.

All of this points to mystical union being for Calvin a fact of Christian existence that he saw as completely the work of the Holy Spirit, and as manifest in the everyday life of the elect in the world. It was not a byproduct of contemplative experience in a monastery or of any kind of spiritual discipline in the believer. Union with Christ came to expression in one's profession of faith, participation in the sacraments, and leading of a moral life – the three criteria that Calvin defined as signs that one can recognize membership in the true church (*Institutes* 4.1.7). Calvin's writings therefore present an example of "ordinary mysticism" as defined earlier in this essay.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the classic Protestant Reformers Luther and Calvin incorporated mystical ideas in their respective theologies. Both believed in a genuine union with Christ that was completely an effect of grace in the life of the believer. They departed from the trajectory of medieval mysticism wherever they saw it as implying

or stating a believer's own movement towards God. Thus, they approved of mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and John Tauler, who emphasized mystical union as a gift of grace.

If Luther and Calvin rejected speculative mysticism, they did not reject mysticism in the fundamental sense outlined by McGinn. Their writings show that they had a strong consciousness of the presence of God – experienced as saving grace – in the lives of the elect, and they saw that presence as grounding the Christian way of life. To use McGinn's phrase, they did not see themselves as promoting or "practicing mysticism," but they recognized a mystical element in the practice of Christianity.

Notes

1   A problematic aspect of McGinn's rubric for Protestantism is the adjective "immediate," because it seems to imply an experience that bypasses Christ, the Word of God, and the sacraments. In truth, such an understanding can be just as problematic from a Catholic perspective. However, some scholars have argued for mystical experience as a "mediated immediacy," i.e., what is *experienced* as immediate is in fact always mediated. For example, Bernard Lonergan (76–77) states that even in the "prayerful mystic's cloud of unknowing," there is a "mediated return to immediacy."

2   An extended discussion of scholars who followed Ritschl, including Karl Holl (1866–1926), Erich Seeberg (1888–1945), Heinrich Bornkamm (1901–1977), Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001), and Adoph Harnack (1851–1930), can be found in Bengt Hoffman's underappreciated study *Luther and the Mystics* (37–100).

3   The reformations of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli all spawned radical movements. In Luther's case, his colleague Andreas Karlstadt and the would-be revolutionary Thomas Müntzer were to become two of his nemeses. Zwingli's reformation would be the catalyst for the rise of the Anabaptist movement. Calvin's reformation would lead to the rise of Puritanism. The Radical Reformation has been shown to be an incredibly complex and diverse phenomenon, but one thing that many of the groups and figures had in common was the idea that they enjoyed the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While Luther and Calvin both believed in the irreplaceable role of the Holy Spirit in bringing one to faith, they saw this Spirit as always tied to the external Word of God and mediated through the church. Thus, those who claimed direct inspiration of the Spirit were elevating themselves above God's Word.

4   This insight is not really new, but is to some extent a reiteration and refinement of arguments made several decades ago by a number of Catholic scholars. See Wicks (ed.), especially the chapters by Joseph Lortz and Erwin Iserloh (3–58).

5   See the Luther quote from *Lectures on Romans*, LW25:262.

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Spanish Mysticism and Religious Renewal

Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross

Edward Howells

Ignatius of Loyola (c. 1491–1556), Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), and John of the Cross (1542–1591) are among the greatest spiritual teachers of the Spanish Golden Age. John of the Cross was a poet of the "dark night" and Carmelite friar, a self-effacing and ascetic figure; Teresa of Avila led a reform of the Carmelite Order and was an ecstatic visionary, adept at projecting a public personality; while Ignatius of Loyola was a soldier who found his vocation as a wandering spiritual director, establishing a new "Society" to promulgate his means of helping souls. The differences between these figures are at least as great as the similarities. Yet they took part in a shared movement of Catholic religious renewal, sought similar spiritual reforms, and had many supporters and opponents in common. Considering them together as "mystics" raises certain questions. Can we regard them as "mystics" in the same sense, given the considerable differences in their teaching, and how does "mysticism" bring them together, either historically or in the way that we understand them today?

Ignatius of Loyola

Ignatius of Loyola, born Iñigo in 1491 at the castle of Loyola in the Basque country of northern Spain, was sent as a young teenager to learn the skills of a courtier in an aristocratic household in Aragon. A few years later he entered military service under the Duke of Nájera in Navarre. While defending Pamplona against the French invasion of the city in 1521, he was badly wounded in the leg by a cannonball, leaving him with a limp. As he recuperated and mulled over what to do with his life, he read the lives of saints in *The Golden Legend* of Jacopa da Voraigne and the *Life of Christ* by Ludolph

of Saxony (Ignatius, *Reminiscences* 5). In his autobiography, which he dictated at the end of his life (called the *Memoriale* or *Reminiscences*), he dates his earliest understanding of the process of spiritual discernment to this time. Some thoughts for the future left him dry and discontented, while others he could take delight in, so that "little by little [he was] coming to know the difference in kind of spirits that were stirring: the one from the devil, and the other from God" (*Reminiscences* 8, p. 15).

Ignatius set out on a life in emulation of the saints, especially St. Francis and St. Dominic, with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a poor beggar. He began with a period of retreat for a year at a Dominican monastery in Manresa (Spain), where he engaged in prayer and fasting. Here he encountered an inner aridity and trouble with "scruples" – an obsession with minor faults in the spiritual life – leading to suicidal thoughts. At his confessor's command he ended his fast, but only when he identified certain feelings of disgust in himself at his ascetic regimen, and discerned them as coming from God, was he freed from his predicament (*Reminiscences* 17–25). Ignatius saw a breakthrough in this change, because now "God was dealing with him in the same way as a school-teacher deals with a child, teaching him" (*Reminiscences* 27, p. 25) – that is, directly and in person. He started to receive visions of the Trinity, the humanity of Christ, and Our Lady (Mary), which gave him "much relish and consolation" and "clarity of understanding." He said that as a result his faith was strong enough to die for, on the basis of what he had seen with his "interior eyes" (*Reminiscences* 28–30, pp. 26–27). This was a mystical turn, in line with understandings of mystical theology at the time – similar to both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross – in that he was shifting from an exterior grasp of a spirituality that he wanted to emulate to an interior experience of God's teaching as directly given to him. His view that God was teaching him without books or even the mediation of scripture reflected the "unmediated" character ascribed to mystical theology. Yet he did not develop his mysticism in the manner of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, as we shall see.

After Manresa, Ignatius continued his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but because of the war with the Turks he was unable to establish a ministry there and had to return home. Gradually, he found that he was developing a skill in giving spiritual direction in conversation with individuals that he met on the way, which could be practiced anywhere. This was the origin of his *Spiritual Exercises*. In these early days, the mystical interiority that motivated his teaching caused him considerable difficulty with both church and state authorities. His later status as the founder of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, and the rapid growth and success of the Society, belies the frailty of his work in this period. Ignatius wanted the Jesuits to be able to wander freely, without the boundaries of monastic enclosure and the liturgical hours kept by other religious orders, but this and the nature of his teaching brought opposition (as discussed further below) (O'Malley 6). Matters came to a head when he moved to Rome. The opposition was so strong that he found it necessary to seek the intervention of the Pope, who had earlier expressed support (Ignatius, *Reminiscences* 98; O'Malley 33). The Pope put in place a legal process, and formal approval of the new Society by the Holy See followed swiftly, in 1540. Thus, the Jesuits came under the Pope's direct authority, and were given a vital role in the work of the Catholic Reformation, in re-missioning the Catholic world as well as in missions overseas, in controversy with Protestants, and most of all in boys' education

and founding schools. Ignatius became the superior general of the new Society and spent the rest of his life in Rome, managing the growth of the Society around Europe and overseas and bringing the *Exercises* to completion in 1548. He wrote *Constitutions* for the Society and numerous letters – which indicate his skills in managing people and dealing with those in power – as well as the *Spiritual Diary* and autobiography already mentioned. He died in 1556.

Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*

The *Spiritual Exercises* were written primarily for Jesuits in formation, to help them come to a decision about their ministry. This conditions the type of process involved: it is aimed at sifting motivations and reaching a major life choice in a short space of time. The *Exercises* are structured in four "weeks," making a thirty-day retreat. The first week is concerned with the consideration of sins in order to reach a state of detachment and dependence on God. Ignatius sets out, in the "Principle and Foundation" of the first week, his central notion of "indifference." The aim is to establish a sense of indifference in relation to the life choices and possibilities that face us – excepting those that are evil and thus under a "prohibition" – so that we are able to choose the end for which we are created, which Ignatius summarizes here and repeatedly as "to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by doing so to save one's soul" (Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* [Exx] 23, p. 289; also Exx 15, 179). Frequently, Ignatius links "indifference" to the willingness to follow Christ in poverty, in reaction to what he saw as the corruption of spiritual motivation through power, wealth and status (e.g., Exx 155, 167).

The second week focuses on the life of Christ up to Palm Sunday, and here Ignatius returns to the theme of poverty. In the meditation on Two Standards – which asks us to imagine service of "Lucifer, the deadly enemy of human nature" as compared with "Christ our commander" – the one is identified with riches, honor, and pride, and the other with poverty, insults and humility (Exx 136, p. 310; Exx 142, 146, 147). By giving up the desire for riches, honor, and pride, imaginatively, a complete dependence on God and acceptance of what God wills is engendered. This is the key to freedom from disordered attachments and thus for clear decisions to be made about action in service of God. It sets the stage for making an "election." By "election," Ignatius means a significant life choice – for instance a decision about a religious vocation or career – but any choice requiring careful discernment is included (Exx 171, 178, 189). Ignatius' guidelines on discernment, including the method of consolation and desolation, are given here (Exx 175–188; 316–317, 328–336). Discernment involves investigating the reactions of the heart to different possible courses of action. The decision, once arrived at, is offered to God for confirmation, and then is brought into a testing process that continues into the third and fourth weeks. In the third week, the exercises dwell on the passion of Christ, and in the fourth week on the resurrection and ascension.

The imaginative method employed in individual meditations lies at the heart of the *Exercises*. Each exercise consists of a scene, either from scripture (mostly the Gospels) or using a doctrinal theme, which is intended to provoke a response, by bringing the one who meditates on it into a felt relationship with the divine person involved. The exercise begins with a "composition," that is, a putting together of a story as a mental

picture. The use of the imagination is encouraged – Ignatius speaks of "bringing the five senses to bear" – so that one can develop one's interactions within the scene, involving "the intimate feeling and relishing of things" and an attitude of devotion, which engages the will and emotions (Exx 121, p. 307; 122–125; 2, p. 283). Ignatius would have learned this method from Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ*, but his originality lies in the way that he uses it to engage the individual's motivations for deliberating particular courses of action in the world. As he commented, the *Exercises* were "all the best that I have been able to think out, experience and understand in this life, both for helping somebody to make the most of themselves, as also for being able to bring advantage, help and profit to many others" (*Letter* 6:2, p. 139). They are intended not just for inner nourishment but also to give shape to active lives in practice.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to the *Exercises*, both in accessibility and scope. They are written for directors in the manner of a manual, with the assumption that they will be given in spoken form. Much is left to the discretion of the director in relation to the individual, such as which meditations are to be used and for how long. This means that their transformative potential is obscure to the general reader and they have little value outside the retreat or guided prayer context. Further, being written primarily for Jesuits approaching a major decision about their ministry, they do not address all the movements of the spiritual life and are notably silent on the subject of mystical theology and union with God (Houdek 26–34). It is here that the question of their "mystical" character arises.

Ignatian Mysticism?

Accounts of Ignatius' mysticism today focus on three elements: his experience at Manresa, his trinitarian prayer, and the distinctively Ignatian notion of "finding God in all things," which led his followers to regard him as a "contemplative in action" (Endean 2001: 78). It was not until the early twentieth century that Ignatius' autobiography and *Spiritual Diary* came to popular attention ("Introduction," *Personal Writings*, 8). Before this, Ignatius had not been widely regarded as a mystic. Henri Brémond, for instance, author of the great *Literary History of Religious Thought in France*, who trained as a Jesuit, saw Ignatius at first as a non-mystical figure, concerned with action as opposed to contemplation. Only when he read the autobiography and *Spiritual Diary* in the late 1920s did he change his mind, proclaiming Ignatius to be "the great mystic, so original as to be beyond imitation" (Salin 73). The autobiography, as already mentioned, reports numerous visions. Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary* details his experiences and deliberations in prayer over a six-week period, including trinitarian visions of being taken before the Father, being placed with the Son, and seeing and feeling the Holy Spirit (*Spiritual Diary* I.7, 10, 12, 22; etc.). Hugo Rahner, brother of the more famous Karl, makes an analysis of this inner trinitarian vision in which he seeks to show that it is central to the whole of Ignatius' thought, including the *Spiritual Exercises*, and that it is truly mystical. In a study of the vision that Ignatius received on entering Rome shortly before founding the Society of Jesus, at La Storta, he spells out this quality (Rahner 1979, discussed by Endean 2001: 77–84). Ignatius, he says, sees everything in creation at the level of the trinitarian source: Ignatius is able to "see all together

everything that is created – all that is outside God – from God's side" – "from the stand-point of the Trinitarian God" (Rahner 73, 79–80). Thus, when Ignatius speaks of seeing or finding God in all things, he means it in the sense of seeing all things at the level of their source, flowing directly from the Trinity. Karl Rahner took up his brother Hugo's line of thinking about Ignatian mysticism, similarly regarding it as an immediate awareness of the life of the Trinity within creation (Endean 2001: 84–98).

Is this mystical reading of Ignatius' "finding God in all things" justified? Brémond's early opposition between mysticism, on the one hand, and action on the other hand, needs some consideration. Ignatius promotes an active spirituality of engagement in the world, with little time for withdrawal and solitude. He says that the Jesuits are different from the enclosed religious who spend many hours a day in solitary prayer (*Letter* 23:46–48). Commentators continue to contrast Ignatian spirituality with mysticism on the grounds that it is primarily active rather than passive (Jalics 25–42). This contrast has some support from the mystical tradition, in that many mystics mark the shift to contemplation with an end to outward activity and discursive mental activity. In the apophatic tradition, there is the view that contemplation is imageless and silent, in contrast to image-filled or word-filled cataphatic prayer (Egan 700–704). But the contrast cannot be sustained. Theoretically, a moment's reflection indicates that there is no human state that is wholly inactive. Contemplation is a form of human activity, whatever else it is. Historically, the Jesuits were by no means the first to attempt to be "contemplative in action," departing from the monastic model of withdrawal from the world – this was the intention of the Augustinian canons and the mendicant friars before them, too. Ignatius took the view, uncontroversial in this context, that it was possible to be in immediate communication with God in prayer while active in the world, and no less so because one was active (*Letter* 23:53). The fact that Ignatian spirituality is active is not a sufficient reason for contrasting it with mysticism.

Ignatius' notion of "finding God in all things" appears frequently in his writings. In the *Exercises*, for instance, he says that in spiritual consolation the soul becomes "inflamed with love of her Creator" so that "there is no created thing on the face of the earth that we can love in itself, but we love it only *in* the Creator of all things" (Exx 316, pp. 348–349, my emphasis). Similarly, in a letter to Francis Borgia, one of the first Jesuits, Ignatius says, "when persons go out of themselves and enter into their Creator and Lord, they enjoy continuous instruction, attention and consolation; they are aware how the fullness of our eternal God dwells in all created things" (*Letter* 13:2, p. 161). Ignatius appears to be saying not merely that God can be felt *through* creation, instru-mentally and remotely, but that the soul has an immediate participation in God's own presence in creation. The soul sees creation "in God," that is, from God's perspective. The distinction is important, because it is one that mystical writers in Ignatius' day – such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, as we shall see – used to distinguish mystical apprehensions of God from the non-mystical. The distinction hangs on whether God's presence is felt by a process of inference *from* other things in creation (that is, "remotely"), or whether it is felt *immediately*, by sharing in God's own relation to crea-tion. This explains Hugo Rahner's stress on the fact that Ignatius finds God in all things by seeing creation "from God's side." On this interpretation, Ignatius sees creation not merely as a means to God, but as God sees it, from within the divine view, at the source

of creation, "in" God. The distinction is not developed at any length by Ignatius, but it is sufficiently present to be asserted, and once found, can be regarded as central to his thought as a whole. In the light of his visions, it makes good sense to read the *Exercises* in this way, as having a mystical center, and this reading also ties up with the proclamation by Ignatius' close followers that he was a "contemplative in action."

The Exercises are set up in a way designed to encourage such an immediate relation between the individual and God. Ignatius' initial "annotations" ask the director to "leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord" (Exx 15, p. 286). Likewise, his emphasis on poverty and on imaginatively choosing "poverty with Christ poor" is, as we have seen, intended to free the person from competing attachments so that they can relate to God simply and directly (Exx 167, p. 315). Commentators see in the Exercises a process of progressive simplification in prayer, where meditation works to make the soul increasingly open to God. This contrasts with a view of meditation as something that stands between the soul and God. Ignatian meditation is designed to reduce mediation, to bring the soul into immediate contact with God, rather than to add something in between, and this is why it leads to the mystical goal of "contemplation in action" (e.g., Demoustier 18–22; Endean 2002: 81–82; Sudbrack 97–99; Houdek 32).

Why, then, does Ignatius use so little of the language of mysticism? Bernard McGinn argues that we must understand mysticism not just as a type of experience or consciousness, of an immediate kind, but also as having specific linguistic forms and key terms, on account of its historical situation in texts and language (1998: 13–21). Ignatius' lack of reference to the language of mysticism, as it is found in other mystical writers of the time such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, is then more serious, perhaps indicating a deliberate decision to situate the *Exercises* outside the mystical tradition. For instance, as Joseph de Guibert has noted, there is "the complete absence of what could be called the 'nuptial' aspect of mystical union" in Ignatius (55). Ignatius scarcely makes use of the language of the Song of Songs, developed in the bridal or nuptial tradition of mysticism (see Chapter 2, this volume). Other major parts of the mystical tradition are similarly lacking, such as the "depth" language associated with the Rhineland mystics, and the apophatic language of Dionysius the Areopagite (see Chapters 11 and 23, this volume). These were prominent forms of mysticism in Ignatius' day and readily available to him, but he avoided them.

In the *Exercises*, the most surprising omission is the lack of "union" language. Ignatius hints at the traditional threefold structure of the mystical itinerary, referring to the first week as the "purgative way" and the second week as the "illuminative way" (Exx 10). But he does not mention the "unitive way." Some commentators assume that the unitive way must apply to the third and fourth weeks, by implication – and this was the view put by Ignatius' follower Jerónimo Nadal (O'Malley 48) – while others find it in the second week, as part of the "election" (Robert 100–112). Or, as still others aver, could the unitive way simply be beyond the scope of the *Exercises* (Brémond 1928–1936; Jalics 2002)? This last interpretation is the least acceptable. To exclude union altogether would be to rule out the element of immediacy between the soul and God that I have been arguing for as central to Ignatius' approach in the *Exercises*. Rather, union is best seen as implicit in the entire direction of the text and as its goal. It is

reasonable to see union as present, at least incipiently, in the rules for making an election in the second week, and as coming to the soul's explicit awareness, potentially, in the third and fourth weeks. Why Ignatius chose not to use the term is, then, obscure and must be put down to other factors. Perhaps he relied on good directors to manage mystical developments; or, after his early experience of anti-mystical opponents, he may have judged that the success of the *Exercises* would be compromised by using the common language of mysticism.

Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila was born a generation after Ignatius, in 1515, in Ávila (Spain). Her father, Don Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda, was a businessman and cloth merchant. It is now known that her paternal grandfather had forcibly converted from Judaism after being accused of "apostasy" – practicing Judaism in private – in Toledo in 1485. He moved to Ávila where he purchased a minor aristocratic title, no doubt to help cover his past. Teresa mentions nothing of this, but the fact that she belonged to a "new Christian" (*converso*, "convert") family helps to explain her later reaction against the inequalities of wealth, rank and status that affected her religious order (Williams 11). Teresa entered the Carmelite monastery of the Incarnation in Ávila at the age of twenty. She was a voracious reader of spiritual literature and, while suffering from an illness as a young nun, mentions that she first experienced "union" after reading Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, which taught her the method of "recollection" (*recogimiento*) (*Life* 4:7). Later, however, she says that she lost her way in prayer for nearly twenty years, and even gave it up for a time (*Life* 8:2). At the age of thirty-nine, her desire for God was rekindled by seeing a new statue in the monastery, of Christ in agony. She broke down in tears, feeling how poorly she "thanked him for those wounds" (*Life* 9:1, vol. 1, p. 101). Significant changes followed, known as her "second conversion." She started to understand, through meditating on the "scene in the garden" (of Gethsemane), where Jesus is in need and cries out in anguish, that the incarnation offered her not subordination but a kind of equality: not only did she need God, but God needed her. She felt a new sense of acceptance by God (*Life* 9:4). She discovered that "mental prayer" – that is, informal, personal prayer – was "nothing other than an intimate sharing between friends," in which, as Ignatius also found, she could be directly taught by God, and reach an accord of wills as between friends (*Life* 8:5, vol. 1, p. 94). This gave her a new desire to spend time alone with Christ in prayer.

Not unlike Ignatius, Teresa started to receive extraordinary visions and ecstasies. They brought her into direct contact with Christ and the inner life of the Trinity. But Teresa is unusual, even for her time, for the detail with which she recorded and classified these experiences. They are the main topic of both her *Life* (1562–1565) and her spiritual diary, called the *Spiritual Testimonies* (1560–1581), and occupy a significant portion of her other major works – the *Way of Perfection* (1566–1569), *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1566–1575), and the *Interior Castle* (1577). They are the basis on which Teresa asserts her authority to teach and to write. In 1559, an Index of forbidden books was published by the Inquisitor Fernando de Valdés, which removed many

of the books on prayer read by nuns. In response, Teresa says that, "the Lord said to me, 'Don't be sad, for I shall give you a living book'." She regarded her experiences of prayer as the "living book" for her teaching, which would replace the banned books (*Life* 26:5, vol. 1, p. 226; Ahlgren 39–42).

Teresa's "second conversion" and renewed desire for prayer led her to seek a reform of her Order. As Jodi Bilinkoff has shown, Teresa's monastery of the Incarnation did not provide an atmosphere conducive to prayer, contrary to the Order's eremitical origins on Mount Carmel. The nuns were unable to pray because they were distracted by the daily visits of relatives and friends and by the gossip of the town. Powerful local families who had a stake in the monastery through their gifts of endowment were effectively in charge, rather than the nuns. There were internal divisions between the nuns, caused by differences of social status, with nuns bringing family wealth, servants and titles into the monastery. Teresa sought to remove these abuses. Not being able to take on the powerful forces at work in her own monastery, she founded a new, smaller house in the town, called St. Joseph's. St. Joseph's returned the Order to strict enclosure, as well as to poverty and living on alms (Bilinkoff 123–137). In the *Way of Perfection*, Teresa describes the new way of life. She adverts to her desire to oppose the Protestant threat of the "Lutherans" (*Way* 1:2) – showing her wider reforming intentions – but her main focus is on giving the nuns space for withdrawal, in a friendly, well-ordered and enclosed monastery, so that they can pursue contemplation and attain a full sense of God's interior presence in mystical union. This became the model for her reform and for the further houses that she founded in the years before her death in 1582.

Teresa's Opponents and the Jesuits

Teresa was denounced to the Inquisition at least six times in her life (Ahlgren 32, 45–66). There was a climate of opposition to "spiritual" teaching in Spain that gathered pace during the course of the sixteenth century (Ahlgren 6–31). Ignatius had faced similar difficulties. While travelling through Spain, Ignatius and his companions had been accused by the Inquisition of being *alumbrados* on account of their ragged dress and preference for frequent communion. *Alumbrado*, meaning "illuminated one," was a pejorative term for those who appeared to rely on direct inspiration for their teaching as opposed to the authority of the church, at a time of nervousness over Luther and the northern Reformation (Ahlgren 7–15; O'Malley 43–44). Ignatius and his companions were also questioned about their observance of the sabbath, possibly out of a concern that they were "judaizers" or *conversos* ("converts"), recalling the forced conversion of Jews in recent memory (such as of Teresa's grandfather). They were ordered not to teach on matters of faith, because they were not "learned" (Ignatius, *Reminiscences* 58–62). In reaction to the popular reforming and spiritual movements (groups known as *espirituales*, "spirituals") that proliferated in the early sixteenth century, there was a growing insistence by the church authorities on "learning" and being among the "learned" (*letrados*) (Ahlgren 14). Teresa encountered the same opposition a generation later. She was repeatedly accused of *alumbrado* teaching (Ahlgren, 49–55). Her words against Lutherans and frequent protestations of appreciation for

"learned" confessors, as well as of obedience to the church authorities, show her navigating this opposition (*Way*1:2). The difference in Teresa's case was that the accusations were more serious, because the climate of suspicion had gathered pace since Ignatius' day, and more importantly, because she was a woman. Unlike Ignatius, she depended on her direct experience of God for her authority to write and teach, and she could not acquire learning or seek ordination as a priest, as the Jesuits did, to make herself acceptable (Ahlgren, 21, 67–84).

As Gillian Ahlgren and other scholars have argued, Teresa's success was achieved only by arduous attempts over many years at managing her opponents, attracting support, and developing rhetorical methods of "subordination" to male authority in her written teaching. Teresa's relation to the Jesuits in Ávila illustrates her precarious relationship to authority. The first Jesuits arrived in Ávila in the early 1550s and were welcomed by the reforming party (Bilinkoff 88–95). Teresa's new foundation of St. Joseph's caused divisions, setting the reforming party against the rest of the town and giving rise to considerable animosity. Teresa looked to the Jesuits because, she says, they understood her language of the soul and immediate experience of God's Spirit (*Life* 23:16–18). She had three Jesuit confessors in the period between her second conversion and the foundation St. Joseph's (*Life* 23:3). She also recounts two meetings with Ignatius' close follower, Francis Borgia, who visited Ávila. At the first, Borgia reassured her that her experience in prayer was from the Spirit of God, but that she should always begin with meditation on an event from the Passion, and only if the Lord should then carry away her spirit should she not resist (*Life* 24:3). This was a vital vindication for Teresa at a time when others were accusing her of deception by the devil, and also shows the influence of the meditative method of Ignatius. At the second, Teresa discussed a state in prayer where she felt that the "active and contemplative lives are joined" and "Mary and Martha walk together." Borgia replied that "the experience was very possible, that it had happened to him" (*Way* 31:5, p. 155). In Teresa's last work, the story of her *Foundations*, she recounts many occasions on which the Jesuits helped her in battles with various authorities when making new foundations (*Testimonies* 58; *Foundations* 3:1; 15:1, 4; 27:1; 29:4; 31:1). The well-known Jerónimo Martínez de Ripalda S.J., her confessor in Salamanca in 1573, became her first biographer after her death. These instances show that, in the ecclesial and political landscape of sixteenth-century Spain, Teresa and the Jesuits were thrown together and had much in common. Both were identified as among the *espirituales* and had many of the same reactionary opponents on town councils and in the church hierarchy. They shared the aim of renewing the life of interior prayer as the primary means to reform the Catholic church, and the Jesuits helped Teresa in her part in this movement.

Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*

Teresa's *Interior Castle*, written in 1577, twelve years after the *Life* and five years before her death, is her greatest attempt to systematize her teaching on prayer. She describes an interior journey of seven stages or "dwelling places" (*moradas*, "mansions" in older translations), moving from the exterior of the soul, symbolized as a castle, to the

"center" where Christ dwells, as the king. In the center the soul attains spiritual marriage or union with God (*Castle* 1.1:1–3). The soul, made in the image of God, appropriates its full God-likeness by growing inwardly in an intimate relationship of love with God. "Entering within" is the first step, by reflecting on one's relation to God, thinking of God's greatness and of what this means for oneself as creature – that we are "capable of much more than we can imagine" (*Castle* 1.1:5, p. 286; 2:8, p. 291). The relationship is given movement by the activity of "dealing in turn now with self and now with God," against both sin and the "mud of fears, faintheartedness and cowardice" which cause a "lack of freedom from ourselves" (*Castle* 1.2:10–11, vol. 2, p. 292.). This stage is called "the room of self-knowledge" (*Castle* 1.2:8, p. 291), but self-knowledge here is to be contrasted with the modern sense of an inventory of strengths and weaknesses, meaning rather a dynamic, relational self-awareness of our source in God, in the sense given to the western mystical tradition by Augustine.

Teresa's teaching in all her works on prayer is dominated by the shift to what she variously calls "supernatural" or "mystical" states, which in the *Interior Castle* begin in the fourth dwelling places. The initial sign is a new passivity and loss of control, a "flight" or "suspension" beyond one's natural capabilities. Teresa pictures God as received here in the manner of a flow of water – an image first introduced in her chapters on prayer in the *Life* – but now in the deep "center" of the soul, such that the soul is like a trough filled and "expanded" to share in the very being of God, becoming God's life (*Castle* 4.2:3–6; 3:9; *Life* 11–18). This immediate, mystical relation to God is contrasted with the "ingenuity and skill" of meditative exercises, by which water is brought from far away through "aqueducts" (*Castle* 4.2:3). Teresa does not oppose a return to meditation as the soul progresses, but as the interior of the soul "expands" into a full awareness of union with God at the "center," meditative exercises become less necessary, and may no longer be possible (*Castle* 6.7:10–12; 7.2:3). An important development in the *Interior Castle* is that Teresa ceases to identify union with the ecstatic phenomena of "flights," "raptures" and so on, and hence with a loss of bodily activity, but sees these effects (if they are given) merely as signs of a deeper transformative process in which the whole soul is being renewed in the image of God, on its journey to an immediate union with God at the center. In the seventh (and final) dwelling places, the water of union "overflows," producing exterior virtuous works directly out of the interior union with God, thus joining contemplation to action: Mary and Martha now "work together" in the soul and the soul goes out actively in good works. Thus, the possibility that she had discussed with Francis Borgia attains a crowning place in her teaching, as contemplation and action are joined in the final union. The intimate exchanges between the soul and God at the "center" of the castle, in the spiritual marriage (union), become the immediate source of the soul's actions in the outside world. The soul gains a renewed agency while remaining in the interior union with God (*Castle* 7.1:5; 2:6; 3:12–13; 4:10; Howells 78–92).

Teresa expresses the final union in christological and trinitarian terms. The soul joins Christ's divine nature in the spiritual marriage by exchanging its human nature for his, and this is accompanied by an inner trinitarian vision, of understanding oneself within the company of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and flowing out with the Persons into creation (*Castle* 7.1:6–7; 2:1–2; *Testimonies* 14). This echoes Hugo Rahner's view of

Ignatius, that he saw creation "from God's side" and "from the standpoint of the Trinitarian God." But in Teresa this trinitarian act of seeing is given a more extensive treatment, being placed at the summit of her mystical teaching and being analyzed using a series of images and stages. Equally, on the topic of deliberation towards concrete actions, Teresa is less detailed than Ignatius. She asserts that the same "loving expressions" that unite the soul with God at the center of the soul flow outwards into actions in accordance with God's will, but she does not say how this works in practice or in particular individual circumstances (*Castle* 7.1:5; 2:6). The emphasis of Teresa's teaching is therefore different from Ignatius's. Both give the mystical and trinitarian presence of God in the soul the central place, but Teresa expands this element throughout her work, while Ignatius attends to its practical outworking.

John of the Cross

John of the Cross was born in Fontiveros, Castile, in 1542, a generation after Teresa and twenty-seven years her junior. Less is known about him than Teresa or Ignatius, because he was not a celebrated figure in his lifetime and wrote little about himself. His early years and upbringing were marked by poverty. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, a dealer in silks, died when John was young, leaving John's mother to keep her three boys by piece-work in weaving. She has been described as an "economic refugee" (Thompson 2002: 29), moving the family first to Arévalo and then to Medina del Campo, a major trading center, to find work. In Medina, John went to a free orphanage school for his elementary education and, in his teens, received a scholarship to attend the recently opened Jesuit college. There he gained a high quality education in classical literature, developing his skills in language and poetry, as well as a strong religious formation. He worked in a local hospital for the victims of syphilis to help pay for his keep. At the age of twenty he entered the Carmelite Order in Medina, and was sent to study at the University of Salamanca. He pursued the arts course for three years and took one further year of theology, but a meeting with Teresa of Avila caused him to cut short his studies, to join her in the Carmelite reform. Given his academic abilities this was a surprising decision, indicating his desire for a more rigorous life of prayer.

John was active in the rapid growth of the Carmelite reform, helping to set up new houses for friars and giving spiritual direction to nuns. But he became embroiled in the divisions that soon started to appear in Order between reformed ("Discalced") and unreformed ("Calced") houses, which were exacerbated by the failure of the Spanish monarchy and the Order's authorities in Rome to coordinate their support. To keep the peace, the authorities tried to limit the involvement of the Discalced in Calced houses. Matters came to a head in Ávila, where both Discalced and Calced claimed authority over Teresa's old monastery of the Incarnation. John, who had been acting as confessor to the nuns for the previous five years, was kidnapped and removed to the Calced house in Toledo. He was put in a tiny cell, in solitary confinement, and was taken out only once a week to face the "discipline" of whipping. As Iain Matthew has commented, the psychological effect of being treated in this way by his religious brothers is likely to have been worse than the physical: it cut to the heart of his vow of obedience, and put in

question his life's work (Matthew 9–10). Teresa wrote that he would have received better treatment had he been captured by the Moors (*Letter* 208, cited Thompson (2002: 54, n. 97)! After nine months, however, John managed to escape, apparently by jumping out of the window and falling onto a ledge below, from which he made his way to the Discalced nuns in the city and safety.

What John thought of his experience in prison is hard to tell, since he did not write about it. He went to work at the other end of the country, on the Discalced foundations in Andalusia. But he gives one clue in a letter, likening it to being "swallowed by the whale" – Jonah's whale – which elsewhere he links, as it is linked in the Gospel, to the period between the crucifixion and the resurrection, when darkness and death hold sway but are about to be broken open by new life (*Letter* 1, cited Matthew 11; *Night* 2.6:1). It seems likely that he conceived his great work on the "dark night," called the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night* (*Ascent-Night* for short), out of his sense of utter deprivation in prison. He intended it for those who "feel lost" on the spiritual path, with no sense of spiritual satisfaction or consolation, in a suffering "worse than death" (*Ascent* Prologue, 4–5, p. 71). Within the darkness, he finds that the soul has a hidden yet intense desire for God that can guide it to the light of mystical union.

In 1580 the Order was formally divided into two branches by the Pope, to allow a peaceful coexistence. John rose quickly through the Discalced Order in Andalusia, becoming Provincial in 1585. But further ructions arose within the Discalced branch, from which John was again the loser. He was demoted to the position of Prior in Segovia in 1588, and in 1591 was chosen to lead a missionary expedition to Mexico, now aged forty-nine. Before he took up this appointment, his life was cut short by an infection in his leg, from which he died in December of that year.

John of the Cross's "Dark Night"

John's three major works, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night*, the *Spiritual Canticle*, and the *Living Flame of Love*, are conceived as commentaries on his poems. The poems contain his finest inspiration on spiritual themes, he says, which he then seeks to extend and develop in his commentaries (*Canticle* Prologue). The *Ascent-Night* is the most systematic of the works. John's object is to chart the long process of purgation that precedes union. Purgation and illumination – darkness and light – are combined on the spiritual journey. He applies the benefit of hindsight, from the perspective of union, to find the seeds of union within the process of purgation (*Ascent* 2.4:8–5:11). Indeed, when illumination is mystical, he says, it is felt by the unreformed soul as dark and empty, because God exceeds the capacity of the soul and "blinds" it, like looking at the sun, and because of the soul's impurity, which obscures the light (e.g., *Ascent* 2.8:6; *Night* 2.5). Correctly discerned, however, this "dark illumination" can be received as grace, so that, rather than running away from it or seeking to fill the emptiness with other things, including misplaced spiritual exercises, the soul can begin to rest in the divine inflow and to recognize it as light (*Night* 1.9–10; 2.8:4).

There is a notable difference here between John's approach and Ignatius' *Exercises*. For Ignatius, an important rule of discernment is to follow good feelings in relation to

God, called "consolation," as an indication of God's guidance, while the opposite, called "desolation," show us faults or test our patience and dependence on God, or point to the action of the evil spirit (Exx 316–317, 322). As Jules Toner says, Ignatius does not leave room for John's dark night, which is the opposite of a positive spiritual experience. To use Ignatius' rules in these circumstances would produce the wrong result, by pointing towards desolation rather than consolation and forcing the soul back to meditative exercises that John says should be left off in the most severe parts of the night (Toner 271–282; *Night* 1.9–10). But other commentators find room for greater agreement. They point out that Ignatius does not always regard consolation as an emotionally pleasant experience, and that in the third and fourth weeks, there comes a point when, as Philip Endean says, "activity and discursive meditation cease to satisfy," and there is "confrontation with spiritual weaknesses hitherto unconscious." There is then a "death of a sense of self centered on the ego" in the third week, and "the finding of God's abiding presence through and beyond searing loss" in the fourth week, which has considerable similarities with the dark night (Endean 2000: 50). Valuable as this interpretation is, however, the most that can be said is that Ignatius hints in this direction, while saying very little in the *Exercises* overall about a dark night experience.

The *Ascent-Night* is ordered by John into four "nights," comprising a distinction between active and passive aspects and a further sub-division between the "senses" and the "spirit." But he frequently departs from this order and most of the work is structured instead using an exposition of faith, hope and love (*Ascent* Books 2 and 3). Adopting a correlation derived from Augustine, John applies faith to the intellect, hope to the memory, and love to the will (*Ascent* 2.6). To go forward in the "night" by means of faith, hope, and love is to receive an emptying of these faculties – a sense of loss of the familiar things that one identifies with God's presence – but then to be given new spiritual powers of intellect, memory and will, such that God's deep being, which touches the soul in the soul's "substance" and "center," ceases to be dark and becomes recognizable as light. Thus, the emphasis is on how the mind is transformed by grace to be able to discern God's mystical presence inwardly.

John's two other main works, the *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*, begin with God's trinitarian presence in the soul made in the image of God, moving in stages towards union with God at the center, expressed in terms of the spiritual marriage of Bride and Bridegroom. The treatment of purgation and darkness is briefer in these works, though still present (*Canticle* 12:9–13:1; *Flame* 1:19–25). The immediate presence of God in union is developed as a trinitarian presence in which the soul "breathes" the Holy Spirit within the life of the Trinity (*Canticle* 13:11–12; 39:3–6; *Flame* 1:6; 3:82; 4:2–5, 17) and is able to see creation from the perspective of the divine "center" of all things, found in the "depth" and "center" of the soul (*Flame* 1:9–13; Howells 47–50). At this point, there is also a joining of contemplation and action (*Canticle* 28:3–5; *Flame* 1:36). In these respects John's *Canticle* and *Flame* are like Teresa's *Interior Castle*, and John shares Teresa's emphasis on the interior analysis of union. Also like Teresa, he merely asserts rather than works out the means by which concrete actions are deliberated and chosen in the state of union, in contrast to Ignatius.

John recommends Teresa's treatment of "raptures, ecstasies, and other elevations and flights of the soul" in the *Spiritual Canticle* (*Canticle* 13:7, p. 460), but his overall

attitude to special supernatural experiences is more negative. He is suspicious of such overwhelmingly positive feelings because they may blind the soul to God's hidden presence (*Ascent* 2.7:11; 24:8–9). John is influenced partly by Dionysius the Areopagite, whose apophaticism allows him to juxtapose "darkness" and "light" dialectically rather than seeing them as simple opposites (*Ascent* 2.8:6; *Night* 2.5:3; *Canticle* 14&15:16; *Flame* 3:49; Howells 129–133). More influential, however, is his adoption of a late medieval sensibility of sharing in Christ's suffering and "annihilation" on the cross, which he uses to give aridity and darkness Christological value (*Ascent* 2.7). The notion of the "wound" of Christ, especially, links pain to a more positive sense of vulnerability or opening to God, leading to the transformation of the soul into mutual love in union (*Canticle* 1:16–19; 9:1–3; 13:2–9; 35:7; *Flame* 1:7–8; 2:1–14). Teresa does not give suffering with Christ such a systematic role. For her, Christ's presence is positively felt, as delight, companionship and comfort, even though she pictures Christ's suffering prominently in her visions. But it is not the case that Teresa and John disagree over the value of the humanity of Christ itself: both affirm the humanity of Christ as central, yet they identify it with different felt effects. Teresa associates it with positive feelings while John has a dialectical approach, including negative and positive feelings together (Howells 133–137). In this, Ignatius stands somewhere between John and Teresa. Like John, who sees the first signs of an explicit awareness of union in feelings of sharing the inward suffering of Christ on the cross, Ignatius values the feeling of dereliction and a sense of the inner poverty of Christ as vital parts of making a sound election or life-choice. Like Teresa, however, for the most part in the *Exercises*, he favors positive feelings.

Conclusion

Ignatius, Teresa and John share a view of "spiritual" reform centered on the interior renewal of the soul in relation to God. Their teaching on prayer is directed at bringing the soul to an inward poverty (indifference, detachment, emptiness), where God can fill and teach the soul directly. This is directly connected to their understanding of mystical theology as a relation to God without intermediary, which allows the soul to relate to the world at the level of the trinitarian source of all things in God, rather than "remotely" through creatures understood as outside or over against God. Ignatius' accounts of his visions and the early development of his vocation suggest a mystical journey similar to that charted by Teresa and John. But his *Exercises* and mainstream teaching do not give space to questions of mystical theology and union in the way that the Carmelites do. He is concerned with a more practical deliberation of particular concrete decisions. Yet these decisions are only authentic, for Ignatius, if they spring from an inner union with God in which God moves the will without any obstacle from our side. To "find God in all things" according to Ignatius is to find oneself immediately sourced in God, flowing out of the inner relations of the Trinity, as Hugo Rahner says, and thus no longer in the grip of merely creaturely considerations. On this, there is a deep compatibility and agreement between the mysticism of these three figures. But we must recognize that Ignatius lacks the full articulation of union with God that we find in the two

Carmelites; and they lack the tailoring of unitive action to the individual's circumstances that is Ignatius' forte.

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CHAPTER 29

Seventeenth-Century French Mysticism

Wendy M. Wright

There are eras and geographical locales that, in the eyes of historians as well as contemporary observers, seem to shimmer with religious energy. These are ages that produce figures that shape religious discourse and inspire comment, both contro-versial and admiring. The seventeenth century was such an era and France and its neighboring duchy of Savoy such a locale. That this was a period and locale in which mysticism flourished is aptly claimed despite the fact that the term "mysticism" is a thorny one. In the context of this brief study of seventeenth-century France and Savoy it will suffice to rely on the rather broad, but credible, threefold definition proposed by Bernard McGinn: that mysticism is a part or element of religion, a process or way of life, and an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God (McGinn 1: xiv–xv). This sort of consciousness is different from that found in ordinary religious practices: it is immediate, direct, and takes place on a level of the personality more fundamental than usual conscious activity. Mysticism is thus not to be equated with paranormal experience but rather with a profound and ultimately inexplicable sense of divine presence that is part of a life formed within a situated set of ideas, practices, and communal life that orients one toward ultimate reality, in the case of Christianity, toward a triune God revealed in Jesus the Christ and experienced as the presence of the Holy Spirit.

McGinn's further observation – that all Christian mysticism is theologically and textually mediated, and that it is therefore unproductive to ask whether a particular person had experiences that might be described as "mystical," will guide this inquiry. Rather, the important question is whether or not the writings and witness of a person are significant in the history of the Christian mystical tradition. The figures treated here qualify for inclusion under that criterion. Additionally, it is important to note that the "mystical" element of religion, while cautiously monitored, was accepted during much of the history of western European Christianity. In the period under consideration what one might call a direct consciousness of the presence of God was especially associated

with the traditional idea of union of divine and human wills, the purifying interior journey from self-love to disinterested pure love of God, and the Pauline theme of dying to self in order that "Christ might live in me," not as mere metaphor but as experiential reality. Additionally, during the seventeenth century in France, and within Roman Catholicism especially, this mystical element flourished, although it later became the subject of much disagreement and censure.

This survey will consider the individuals and spiritual traditions they spearheaded that emerged in the seventeenth-century French-speaking world and consider the ways they parsed and contributed to the mystical element of Christianity. These will be grouped under the categories of the Salesian tradition, the French or Bérullian tradition, the French Carmelite tradition, and the Quietist Controversy. Although there are distinct differences among and nuances within these traditions, they all sprang from a single and singular time and region, and their principal actors interacted and influenced one another in important ways.

The Context

France and Savoy in the period under consideration were rife with strife and creative ferment. The continuing reform of European Christianity set the religious, cultural, and political agendas of the day. Within the early modern Catholic world the Protestant challenge gave rise to violent confrontation and to evangelical zeal. France, where a sizable Protestant (Huguenot) minority flourished, was racked by the Wars of Religion (1562–1598). The French monarchs of the century sought alliances with other European powers, and religious uniformity was often central in those alliances. Leading French and Savoyard ecclesiastics of the period consistently played diplomatic and political as well as religious roles.

On the political front religious identity loomed large. Henri III of France died in 1589 without an heir, leaving Protestant Henri of Navarre (later Henri IV) of the Bourbon dynasty in line of succession. The massacre of thousands of Huguenot leaders who had gathered for Navarre's 1572 wedding (later annulled) to Marguerite Valois was indicative of the civil unrest. Henri's quest to secure the throne provoked the Catholic population in France and various factions emerged: some opposed to his succession, some supporting it dependent upon his conversion. The supporters of the oppositional ultra Catholic faction – the *dévots* whose secret society was the *Companie du Saint-Sacrament* – were ultra-montanist (oriented to Rome) and thus in conflict with supporters of French ecclesial autonomy (Gallicanism). After a series of violent sieges, Henri IV took the throne in 1594 and ended the civil warfare by his conversion and by issuing the Edict of Nantes (1598), which gave the Huguenot minority religious and civil liberty.

Despite the backdrop of often-violent conflict, creative renewal and spiritual fervor also characterized the early modern period. The ferment gave rise to the energy that would shape the early modern Catholic church. New religious congregations had already sprung up (notably the Jesuits, Ursulines, Theatines, Barnabites, and Oratorians), and older orders had undergone reform (the Carmelites and Capuchins). Spiritual renewal was in the air with fresh translations of spiritual classics and new works being

circulated. Devout societies, many of them lay, developed with political as well as spiritual aims. Innovative communities of *filles seculaires* created to respond to social needs sprang up. Throughout Europe the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) were being variously implemented or resisted, this latter especially by Gallican factions in France. Nevertheless, reforming bishops led the way, founding seminaries and religious education programs and revitalizing French Catholicism. The mystical element of Catholicism flourished in this milieu.

As the century progressed, societal institutions – including the monarchy, the nation-state, the church and the family – became more consolidated and hierarchically ordered. The creative impulses of the early century gave way to a shoring up and centralization of all institutions. When Henri IV was assassinated in 1610, his heir Louis XIII, under the regency of his mother Marie de Medici and the direction of Cardinal Richelieu, took command of the French monarchy. Richelieu sought to weaken the power of the Huguenots and to neutralize the ultra-montanist factions. Louis XIII and his wife, Anne of Austria, eventually produced the next heir, Louis XIV. During his mother's regency assisted by Cardinal Mazarin, the civil wars, known as the *Fronde*, pitted nobles and supporters of the French *parlements* against the monarchy but resulted in the establishment of an absolutist regime. The *Companie du Saint-Sacrament* was suppressed at this time. Louis came to full power in 1663. Among the actions the "Sun King" took to consolidate his royal power was the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, thus driving the Huguenots from the county. Louis' consolidation of power required religious as well as political uniformity. Not only was the Protestant minority expelled, but Jansenism and Quietism, theological movements that critics felt de-emphasized free will and moral action, were also identified as dangerous heretical tendencies and condemned. Fear of heresy or dissent dominated spiritual discourse and created factions within the church (see Chapter 6, this volume). A rigorist form of moralism along with an emphasis on ecclesial conformity prevailed. Thus mystical tendencies enthusiastically embraced early in the era became suspect and religious experience became subject to scrutiny and control.

The Salesian Tradition

François de Sales (1567–1622) was a French speaking Savoyard and, as firstborn son from a notable family, was expected to fulfill his inheritance by continuing the seigneurial duties of his father. Savoy had for over a century been at the center of political and religious conflict with family interests at stake. As an adolescent, the heir was sent to study in Paris at the Jesuit *collège de Clermont*, noted for the zeal of its schoolmasters, Ignatius of Loyola's "soldiers of Christ." Trained in the Christian humanist curriculum, he came away imprinted by the humanist education, the apostolic spirit, and the positive theological anthropology that pervaded Jesuit formation. All was done for the greater glory of God. The human arts and sciences were valued. Attentiveness to experience, especially the interior movements of affectivity, was crucial for discernment. Above all, as a student de Sales was steeped in the religious seriousness of the Catholic Reformation that his schoolmasters promoted. He also was shaped by the teachings

of Benedictine exegete Gilbert Génébrard, who introduced him to the poetry of the *Song of Songs*, which gave coherence to his spiritual vision. Life became for de Sales a love song between humanity and the divine Lover, a song implanted in each human heart.

Advanced study in Padua, where evidence of new religious communities surrounded him, was followed by the revelation that de Sales wished to renounce his inheritance and become a priest. Supported by his mother, he was ordained and shortly thereafter became adjutant to the Bishop of Geneva, Claude de Granier. Because Geneva at the time was a Protestant city, and no Catholic worship was tolerated, the Roman Catholic episcopal seat was in Annecy in Savoy. The young ecclesiastic was sent on mission to reconvert the Chablais territory, which was a pawn in the politicized religious wars. Upon succeeding de Granier, de Sales began the formidable work of reform laid out for Catholic episcopal leaders of the day. The Savoyard continued as the exiled bishop of Geneva for the remainder of his life. He was a noted spiritual director and preacher and constantly on the road occupied with the work of reform and spiritual renewal in his diocese as well as serving as diplomat on behalf of the Duke of Savoy.

At the core of that layered process, de Sales saw the quickening of the human heart as critical. He believed that all persons were created to know and love God and that God's deepest desire was that all be saved. Using his considerable literary skills, he imaged God as having a beating heart whose movement creates and sustains life. Men and women, made in the divine image and likeness, have hearts (conceptualized as the center of all capacities) meant to beat in rhythm with the creator's heart. But because of sin, human hearts were, as it were, arrhythmic, even as they retained the possibility of being realigned. The human-divine heart of Jesus Christ became for de Sales the mediator between hearts of God and humankind. The Savoyard had a particular scriptural image of Jesus in mind. Matthew 11:28–30 presents Jesus as welcoming all to come and learn from Him, for He is gentle and humble of heart. It was qualities such as these, which he termed the "little virtues," that revealed the heart of God. Christian life then was to be a process of letting Jesus "live" in the heart through the practice of the little virtues, variously identified as humility, gentleness, patience, simplicity, cordiality and charity.

This process was one into which men and women from all walks of life and backgrounds were invited. An interior process, this "letting Jesus live" involved a lifetime of *kenosis*, of letting go so that the individual might say with St. Paul, "I no longer live but Christ lives in me." What de Sales did is democratize the medieval mystical trope of the "exchange of hearts" that Catherine of Siena and others had undergone, thus signifying their union with the divine. *Vive Jesus*! was de Sales' motto for this mystical transformation effected in ordinary life. In addition, the influence of Catherine of Genoa is evident in his thought: she had described the purgative, illuminative and unitive path leading to the disinterested "pure Love" of God. De Sales transposed this fifteenth-century Italian view into a universalized and unobtrusive key. For him, divine love draws all unto itself through the hidden, interior mortifications practiced in whatever "state in life" in which one finds oneself. The end result was a prompt availability to follow God wherever led, a liberty of spirit that trusted in divine providence, and a willingness to live between the "two wills of God." De Sales identified these as God's will revealed through discernment (the "signified will"), and God's will known through

circumstances beyond one's control (the "will of God's good pleasure"), neither of which he conceived as Gods' fully revealed will, which was unknowable.

While in Paris on episcopal business in 1602, de Sales became part of the spiritual salon that met at the home of Madame Acarie. There he came into contact with many of the figures who contributed to the French spiritual renaissance. The Savoyard gained popularity for his volume, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1610), which encouraged lay persons to orient their hearts and lives toward God. De Sales' more theoretical work, *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), explores the Pascal dynamic of the relationship between the God of love and the human person and the mysterious ways that grace works in the most elevated regions of the soul. He borrowed from the Rhineland mystical tradition the concept that there is a *fine point* of the soul. For him the soul was composed of inferior, sensitive and superior levels. The latter is the domain of free will and reason. Will and reason also have inferior and superior functions and growth in love requires movement from the inferior to the superior. Reason itself can operate according to the natural light of the intellect or the light of discursive faith (theology) or according to the light of intuitive faith, without discursive knowledge or activity. It is there, at the *fine point*, that direct experience of the presence of God takes place.

Intrinsic to humanity is the ecstatic desire to go beyond self. The critical choice is therefore to direct desire toward the divine that is love's origin and end. Prayer is central to this Godward movement. As one grows in intimacy with the beloved, one is drawn into deepening degrees of love that require self-surrender and abandonment. One moves from the love of complacency, to benevolence, to conformity. Here adhesion, submission, resignation and union are attained. Beyond this is a pure love that loves God for God's self and aims at total donation. De Sales refers to this in terms of "holy indifference." While still cherishing the loves of all levels of the soul, holy indifference resides at the *fine point* and consists not of special experiences or communications but of a radical union of the human will with God's will. One's heart is then infused with God's charity and one is compelled to the ecstasy of action on behalf of the beloved's desire, enabled not only to live the commandments but to regard disgrace and persecution as beatitude. One lives not for oneself but lives in the "world" by practicing radical, self-forgetful love of neighbor. This is the kenotic pattern of Christian life for de Sales, for whom Mount Calvary was the mount of lovers. The *Treatise* describes this Salesian hidden, apostolically oriented mysticism as it is expressed relationally through the practice of the little virtues in response to the Matthean Jesus who invited all to come and learn from Him.

Jeanne de Chantal (1572–1641) was a young widow with four underage children when she first encountered Bishop de Sales as he preached the Lenten sermons in her natal town of Dijon, France. She had come to the sermons with her father, Bénigne Frémyot (president of the parliament of Burgundy and leader of the moderate faction that supported Henri IV) to hear the charismatic preacher. This initial meeting signaled the beginning of a remarkable friendship and collaboration. Jeanne had been happily married to Baron Christophe du Rabutin de Chantal and was thrown into spiritual crisis when he was killed in a hunting accident in 1601. Despite her family's assumption that she should do so, she refused to marry again. When she met François de Sales in 1604, the baroness was residing in the countryside under the control of her irascible

father-in-law. Her encounter with the Savoyard was the beginning of her transformation. He became her spiritual guide and for several years encouraged her deepening relationship with God in the midst of the responsibilities of her widowed and maternal life. Gradually, the relationship between the two ripened into a mature spiritual friendship, a relationship both understood as a specific form of love that, as all types of love, had Divine Love as its source and end. François described their friendship as a "bond of perfection."

As her children grew, Madame de Chantal and her friend discerned for her a new life. She became the first superior of an innovative community, the Visitation of Holy Mary, designed for women who, like her, were committed to the process of living Jesus, yet for whom no institutional space in the church of their day existed. Widows, the disabled, the frail of health, and older women were the Visitation's anticipated entrants. The spirit of the Visitation was precisely the intensified practice of living Jesus that de Sales envisioned. The asceticism of the sisters was to be entirely interior: they were to practice the little relational virtues with one another and extend themselves to those in need in the local community as possible. They began as a diocesan congregation without enclosure but, after the community spread outside of Savoy, it was transformed into a formal cloistered order in conformity with Tridentine regulations. By the time of her death, Mère de Chantal had presided over the establishment and regulation of eighty Visitation monasteries.

The foundress described the type of prayer that emerged in the Visitation as the prayer of *simple remise* (simple resting). Simplicity was the little virtue that Jeanne most prized, and her sisters in religion seemed likewise drawn to a hidden, non-discursive intimacy with God. This became the characteristic prayer of the order. Books 8 and 9 of the *Treatise on the Love of God* are said to reflect the interior experience of the early Visitandines. The sisters also developed the theme of the "martyrdom of love." She is recorded as speaking of this inner reality to which she felt some individuals, herself included, were destined. An intense assault of divine love would lead a courageous few to undergo a terrible life-long dying to self which would engender unimaginable interior suffering to the one generous enough to love with abandon. The theme of interior martyrdom would be echoed throughout the annals of the seventeenth-century Visitation.

While displays of paranormal experience such as visions and locutions would be discouraged in this order that considered its members to be the "hidden violets" in the garden of the church, the accounts of second and third generation Visitation sisters would nevertheless reflect the mystical controversies emerging in the French church. Toward the end of the century, conflict over the teachings of Quietism, conflated in the minds of its detractors with "pure love," would grow heated. The annals of Visitation monasteries show both evidence of utilization of the language associated with pure love (such as the state of love indifferent to any recompense and passivity in prayer) and the attempt to distance monastic communities from the quarrels by emphasizing affective prayer and expunging from convent documents any mention of interior states reminiscent of Quietism.

Marguerite-Marie Alacoque (1647–1690) was a Visitandine of the monastery of Paray-le-Monial remembered as "the Apostle of the Sacred Heart." Although the Sacred

Heart would not emerge as a universal Catholic devotion until the eighteenth century, de Sales' emphasis on the qualities of the divine Heart that was carried by the Visitation order laid the groundwork for the formal devotion. Marguerite-Marie was central to that later development. During an isolated childhood the future "Apostle" developed an intense interior conversation with her beloved Jesus and longed to embrace religious life. In 1671 she entered the Paray community, a Visitation originally founded as part of Catholic efforts to counteract Protestant influence in the region. With effort she submitted to the disciplines of daily monastic routine. Her inner life, however, was far from routine. Her spiritual autobiography, written under obedience to her superiors, narrates the inner drama of a series of "great revelations" in which Christ revealed the secrets of his Eucharistic Sacred Heart and requested that a set of devotional practices, including a universal feast day, be instituted to honor His Heart. This was to make reparation for the distain and indifference it was shown. Marguerite-Marie came to see herself as a chosen spouse who shared Christ's bed of sufferings as well as a beloved disciple commissioned to spread the burning flames of his charity. Her Jesuit confessor Claude de la Colombière and a series of Jesuits after him promoted her revelations.

Marguerite-Marie's experiences find precedence in the tradition of medieval women's visionary mysticism (thirteenth-century Juliana of Liège received visions which established the Feast of Corpus Christi), as well as reflect the themes characteristic of seventeenth-century religiosity. The motif that permeates her posthumous *Vie par elle-même* (1726) is the radical loss of self or *anéantisement* (annihilation). This type of language was ubiquitous in spiritual literature of the era, reflecting the widespread influence of the Bérullian tradition. The Visitandine saw herself as achieving conformity to Christ by recognizing herself as an abyss of unworthiness who could thank her Lord for making her see herself as she was in order to annihilate her in the esteem of creatures. Such radical identification with the crucified Christ had a redemptive end: she experienced this in a vision of a cross covered with thorn-tipped flowers upon which Jesus, the spouse, invited her to lie in order to share the delights of pure love, a love known through enduring the pain that He suffered for love. Marguerite-Marie's visions combined the Salesian world of hearts and its emphasis on pure love with Bérullian theological anthropology to create a devotion that both promoted Catholic Eucharistic theology and critiqued Protestant and Jansenist theologies.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751) is another figure who can be said to carry Salesian insights into the next century, albeit in refracted ways. A Jesuit who for a time was the confessor to the Visitation nuns at Nancy, he is known through his letters of advice to that community. Trained in and a teacher of the Society's humanist curriculum, de Caussade was a noted spiritual guide. The popular book *L'Abandon à la Providence divine*, assembled by the Nancy Visitandines and published after his death, is attributed to him, although his authorship is disputed. What can be said is that the book reflects his advice given to the Visitation community and highlights aspects of the Salesian tradition. Also translated as *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, the book stresses conformity to the "will of God's good pleasure" as encountered or suffered in the events of daily life. It assumes that divine grace acts in and through human experience and that the simple practice of abandoning oneself to God's will in whatever way it may present itself, is the key to sanctity. Surrendering, trusting in the goodness of

providence, one gradually is dispossessed of self-will and begins to love all in and for God with pure love.

The Bérullian or French School

Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629) is credited as the founder of the second distinctive spiritual school to emerge in the French-speaking world during the seventeenth century. The French School stands in intimate relationship with, yet also in contrast to, the Salesian tradition. Bérulle was born into a family of gentry in Troyes but grew up in the politically tumultuous yet spiritually vibrant atmosphere of the capital. Like de Sales, he attended the Parisian *collège* of Clermont but later studied at the Sorbonne. The two men did not meet until they were both adults and engaged in the work of Catholic reform, when in 1602 they converged at the spiritual salon of Barbe Acarie, Bérulle's cousin. There they exchanged ideas with other luminaries of the contemporary spiritual renaissance, among them Carthusian Dom Beaucousin. This latter had introduced the Acarie circle to the abstract mysticism of the Rheno-Flemish mystics, especially Tauler, Ruysbroek and Harphius. The transcendence and absolute nature of God that these medieval taught impressed Bérulle and shaped his views on the grandeur of God and the spirit of adoration that are hallmarks of his thought.

His theological anthropology was much more guarded than was de Sales'. The latter, as a Christian humanist, was known for his optimism about human capability and God-directedness. Bérulle, in contrast, emphasized the distance between the divine and human reality. In consequence, his mystical vision took a quite different form than did his Savoyard colleague's. Guarded about fallen humanity's capability, he saw creatures as "nothing." Bérulle's mysticism nevertheless posits that through the incarnation humankind is made capable of incorporation in the depths of being into Christ's various dispositions and thus divinization.

Ordination to the priesthood in 1599 led the young man to consider the dignity and responsibilities carried by clergy. Concerned about the disgraceful state of the priesthood, he dedicated himself to the elevation and reform of the clerical state. He established the French Oratory modeled on the Italian Oratory of Philip Neri and dedicated to the spiritual renewal of the diocesan clergy. Like other important ecclesiastics of his day, he found himself called upon to intervene in diplomatic missions such as the marriage negotiations on behalf of Louis XIII's sister. He was made a Cardinal and encouraged the spiritual renewal of France by introducing Teresa of Avila's Discalced Carmelites into the country (see Chapter 28, this volume). The themes of the school that bears his name – apostolic, Christocentric, Theocentric, Trinitarian, Marian, elevating the role of the priesthood, and the sacraments, and dedicated to reform – would profoundly shape the religious ethos of the later seventeenth century.

Discours de l'état et des grandeurs de Jésus (1623) is Bérulle's seminal work, which he hoped would explain the theological vision behind his controversial practice of promoting vows of servitude to Jesus. Composed of twelve discourses and a commentary on the vow of servitude, it articulates Bérulle's central insight that the majesty of God seeks adoration from creatures, but sin makes it impossible for creatures to comply.

The incarnation, however, makes it possible because Jesus, who is divine, has become human and as a human adored God. Human beings can thus become adorers as they conform themselves to Christ in his various dispositions or states (*états*), especially of adoration and of servitude. The process begins with the renunciation of evil and the recognition of human nothingness (*neant*), since only God possesses true being. For Bérulle, the true state of reality is captured in the motto, *le grandeur de Dieu et neant de l'homme*. The Dionysian, neo-Platonic themes found in Rhineland mysticism are thoroughly Christified in his thought. Human beings have come from God and find fulfillment in returning to their origin. This mirrors the kenotic pattern of Christ's incarnation. But the wounding of sin deepens human need for Christ and the return is possible only through the mediation of Christ.

Bérulle takes the daring position that, because divinity and humanity co-exist in the Word, all the states of the interior of Jesus' human life have been divinized and made available to those who conform themselves to Him, thus enabling humankind to be divinized. The process of conformity is explicitly Pauline and must take place through a profound adherence of the will to the divine Will. Bérulle saw in the humiliation of the Incarnate Word a model of annihilation of the human self and submission before God toward which he believed the self aspires. The vow of perpetual servitude to Jesus emerged out of his theological vision. Servitude, to make oneself a slave, is to bind oneself to the mystery of servitude that Christ himself surrendered to in his incarnation; it is thus the entryway into the grandeur of the divine life.

Charles de Condren (1588–1641) followed Bérulle as superior of the Oratory. It was in great part due to him that the mystical spirit promulgated there was spread. Although he left few writings, Condren's importance to the development of mysticism in the era is amply attested. He taught that God's grandeur can only be glorified by the annihilation (*anéantissement*) of creatures: union with God must take place by death in participation with Jesus who passed to God's glory by way of the Cross. For him adoration was expressed through sacrifice and immolation and exemplified by the victim state of Jesus in the eucharistic host. Condren exerted enormous influence over subsequent figures of the French spiritual renaissance including Jean-Jacques Olier, Vincent de Paul, and Jean Eudes.

Jean-Jacques Olier (1608–1657) was as a boy encouraged in his priestly vocation by de Sales but it was not until young adulthood that he took his spiritual life seriously. Trained by the Jesuits at Lyon and at the Sorbonne, he brought singular urgency to the cause of religious and social reform. Under the guidance of Vincent de Paul, Olier assisted the poor and trained for the priesthood. After ordination he associated himself with the French Oratory, at the time under the direction of de Condren who introduced him to the theological/mystical vision of Bérulle. This cleric, like others of the French School, saw the reform of the priesthood as crucial to the viability of the French church and dreamed of founding seminaries as outlined by the Council of Trent. Olier would live out Condren's dream. After several false starts he established a community of clerics in the notoriously worldly parish of Saint Sulpice in the capital and the group set out to catechize, reform morals, and provide food, shelter and education for the needy population. Olier, like de Paul, made it a practice to link the wealthy and the poor and he cultivated influential friends, including the Queen Regent, Anne of Austria.

Eventually, the seminary dream became a reality, and Saint Sulpice became a center of education for diocesan clergy. To staff the seminary he created a community of priests, the Sulpicians. Among the many clerics who worked under Olier was François Fénelon.

A deeply Christocentric mystic in the tradition of the French school, Olier felt that the human person would be replaced by the person of the Word who is alive as "states," which are never interrupted, but live still in the members of the mystical body of the church. Olier emphasized the eucharistic host-victim nature of Jesus, and described the divinity of Christ as the altar of gold upon which the greatest sacrifice, his humanity, was consumed. A profound interior trail, during which the mature Olier was unable to function, and which he interpreted as the purifying work of the Holy Spirit, was followed by a decisive transformation: from darkness to light, confusion to clarity of thought, stammering to preaching eloquence. This experience convinced Jean-Jacques of the efficacy of the divine presence. Olier carried Bérulle's notion of *anéantissement* to its logical extreme. For him, all self-preoccupation and ego strength must be destroyed in order to completely become a receptacle for God. Olier used vivid terms to describe this process: one must undergo a Holocaust, become a scapegoat, and submit to being a burnt offering.

As did so many of the religious luminaries of the century, Olier was nurtured in a spiritual relationship with a member of the opposite sex. For Bérulle, Carmelite Madeleine de Saint Joseph (1578–1637) was such a companion. Olier was deeply indebted to Dominican prioress Agnès de Jésus (1602–1634) who, despite the brevity of their time together, invited him into an intimacy with Jesus though a mystical initiation. The impact of their meetings would direct his life for many years. Toward the end of his life, Olier made three vows of radical servitude: to Jesus, to serve souls, and to be a host-victim. He ended his life paralyzed as a result of a series of strokes yet remained fiercely committed to his apostolic mysticism exercised as the renewal of the French church. He established the Community of Daughters of the Interior Life of Mary and sent Sulpicians to the missions in New France where they would form generations of clergy.

Jean Eudes (1601–1680) belonged to the Oratory for eighteen years and, like his fellow clerics, dedicated his life to the renewal of French Catholicism. Although he is considered a member of the French School, his spirituality is also marked by a Salesian spirit. Trained by the Jesuits in Caen he joined the Oratory and was sent to Paris where he was trained by Bérulle and Condren. Eudes was a tireless reformer and throughout his life preached hundreds of internal missions to strengthen the faith of the French. Like his mentors, he felt called to establish communities dedicated to ecclesial and social reform: his Society of the Heart of the Mother Most Admirable encouraged lay spirituality and his Institute of Our Lady of Charity provided a refuge for women forced into prostitution. In 1643 he severed ties with the Oratory in order to found the Society of Jesus and Mary (Eudists), dedicated to the spiritual formation of seminarians preparing for parish mission work. He was, however, not always appreciated: the Jansenists found fault with his intense Marian devotion and some Oratorians looked on him as a renegade. Despite this, he preached tirelessly and carried on an active practice of spiritual direction. As did many of the mystics of the century, Eudes cultivated a spiritual friendship with a member of the opposite sex, Marie de Valleés (1590–1656), an uneducated

woman with mystical gifts. A likely fruit of their relationship was Eudes' interest in the mystical marriage, in which a person experiences being a spouse of the divine.

Like de Sales's, Eudes' spirituality was heart-centered. He combined Bérulle's mystical Christocentrism with the spirit of *dévotion* preached by the Savoyard. Longing to live in constant intimacy with Jesus and his mother Mary, the unity of whose hearts he insisted on, he composed liturgical and poetic works that gave expression to his vision. He taught that Mary's heart, composed of bodily, spiritual and divine (*fine point*) dimensions, was perfectly conjoined to that of her son. As exemplar of the human person, Mary shows the way in which divinization takes place: loving incorporation into the mystery of the Christ life. *Le Royaume de Jesus* and *Le Coeur Admirable de la Tres Sainte Mère de Dieu* (1637; 1680) are lasting legacies to his devotion as are his liturgies composed for worship of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Like the Sulpicians, who answered the call to overseas mission, Marie de l'Incarnation (1599–1672) also discovered her religious identity on the soil of North America. Born in Tours as Marie Guyart, she was married young and soon widowed, left to care for a failing business and small son. Her reading of François de Sales and Teresa of Avila convinced Marie that she should not remarry and, after several years working, she entrusted her son to relatives and joined the teaching order of Ursulines. Although the convent to which she belonged was cloistered, Marie records that she was destined for the missionary life after she received a visitation from the apostolic spirit of Jesus Christ. In 1639 she was sent to help found the first convent of women in Quebec. Educator among the Native American population for thirty years, Marie endured unspeakable hardships yet kept her focus upon her interior journey toward divine intimacy, conceptualized as thirteen stages of prayer through which she passed from childhood to death. Her autobiographical *La Relations* (1633 and 1654) are masterpieces of mystical literature. Visions of the blood of Christ, the Trinity, and spiritual marriage – which she described as a continual loving respiration, a communication of spirit to spirit by which she no longer lived but Christ lived in her – guided her way. Marie's mysticism was in keeping with the French School in the sense that she exemplified many of the features of that religious current: especially its mystical incorporation into Christ leading to apostolic zeal.

The Carmelite Tradition in France

Madame Acarie (1566–1618), born Barbe Avriot and in religion known as Marie de l'Incarnation, was the hostess of Paris' esteemed spiritual salon and, after her widowhood, was instrumental in founding the French Carmel. From an early age she had an intensely spiritual bent, which continued after she married Pierre Acarie. Madame Acarie bore six children and was actively involved in charity work; yet she was subject to continual ecstasies, which caused her no end of confusion and were not appreciated by her husband. They were both supporters of the Catholic League and, following the abjuration of Henri IV and the League's dissolution, he was exiled from the capital. Barbe Acarie was a patron of the *dévots* movement, and her home became the meeting place of the leaders of the French spiritual renaissance. Those who frequented her salon

included, among others, Bérulle, François de Sales, and Vincent de Paul. An apparition of Teresa of Avila prompted Acarie to enlist the help of her cousin, Bérulle, and begin the process of introducing the Teresian Carmel onto French soil. In 1604 a company of six Spanish Carmelites – including Teresa's intimates, Ana de Jesus and Ana de St. Bartholomew – established themselves in Paris. After she was widowed, Madame Acarie entered Carmel herself. As a spiritual guide, she was famed for her skill in the discernment of spirits and was called upon by the chief spiritual figures of the day to evaluate those who desired a more intimate relationship with God. The translation of the Carmel from Spanish soil was not without difficulties. Oversight by the Spanish was terminated amidst dissention, and Bérulle and Acarie fell out over his insistence on having the sisters take a vow of servitude. Though she left no writings, Acarie was esteemed in her era as an exemplar of mystical faith.

Madeleine de Saint-Joseph (1578–1613), the first French prioress of the Paris Great Carmel, illustrates the connections between the various mystical currents of the period. Born Madeleine du Bois de Fontaines in Tours, she entered the Carmel a few weeks after its founding. Scholars suggest that she encouraged Bérulle to undertake the project. Over the years the two of them enjoyed an enriching spiritual friendship. She supported him on the matter of the vow of servitude and his later writing appears to have been influenced by her emphasis on love, adding a dimension to his perennial theme of adoration. Madeleine served at a succession of Discalced Carmels, thus forming the first generation of French followers of Teresa. She was sought out by many of the notable figures of the day including Pope Urban VIII, Louise de Marillac, Vincent de Paul, and Cardinal Richelieu. Toward the end of her life, and as the political and theological forces opposed to mysticism gained momentum, she found herself having to clarify or reject some of the abstract mysticism associated with the Acarie circle.

Laurent de la Résurrection (1614–1691). Born Nicolas Herman, this former soldier joined the Discalced Carmelites in Paris as a lay brother assigned to work in the kitchen and as the monastery sandal maker. Although his education was limited and his manner rustic Laurent attracted a steady stream of visitors who sought his advice, among them Fénelon. Extent letters, his *Spiritual Maxims*, *Conversations*, biographical sketches and a two volume synthetic work, known in English as *Practice of the Presence of God drawn from the Letters of Br. Lawrence* (1692; 1694), comprise the evidence for his teachings. At the heart of his vision was a simple practice of awareness of God's presence permeating all things and accessible in the midst of any ordinary activity. An early period of interior darkness occasioned by the fear of damnation lifted when Laurent surrendered to this state and found himself possessed of an inner peace. He advised all to get used to gradually offering the heart to God whenever possible, undertaking familiar conversations in the midst of daily work. Eventually, he thought, the practice of recalling one's attention leads to a habitual awareness of the divine presence in each moment and circumstance. Popular in his lifetime, and praised as the mystic of the humble life of tedious tasks, Laurent's approach at the end of the era became associated with Quietism and the anti-mystical condemnations that swirled about Fénelon and Madame Guyon. Despite this, his writings, like Guyon's (see below), remained popular with Protestants and it is due to those communities that his legacy survived.

The Quietist Controversy

Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon, known as Madame Guyon (1648–1717) (see Chapter 31, this volume), featured prominently in the anti-mystical controversy that rocked France at the end of the seventheenth century. As a girl, Jeanne-Marie was introduced to a life of Jeanne de Chantal which served as personal inspiration and an introduction to interior prayer. During an unhappy arranged marriage, which produced several children, she developed an intense devotional life. In 1668 Madame Guyon experienced an inner transformation that gave rise to a form of non-conceptual prayer she termed the "prayer of faith." Widowed, and left with considerable means, she arranged for care of her children and began a peripatetic lifestyle that was to be hers for the next twenty years. In 1680 another seminal inner event, followed by a retreat led by her spiritual companion, Barnabite priest François LaCombe, led her to believe she was led by a will greater than her own. This emboldened her to pursue an apostolic ministry expressing her "spiritual maternity" and to dedicate herself to the spread of concepts of mystical prayer and abandonment of self, an unusual vocation for an unaffiliated lay woman in that era.

Madame Guyon produced a voluminous corpus of work that circulated in manuscript form and was published posthumously between 1712–1790. Much of it she claimed was automatic writing created through the compulsion of the Holy Spirit. *Spiritual Torrents* and *A Short Method of Prayer* were the most popular. The former work characterizes the progress of the soul touched by God as a transforming cruciform annihilation. She likened the chosen soul to a river moving with torrential force toward its destination, God. Evoking the language of "negative mysticism," she described the progressive stripping of self from all attachments, including interior consolations, and described death to self and union as the merging of river waters with the ocean of divine love. In Paris, Madame Guyon gained entry into the spiritual circle presided over by Madame de Maintenon, the pious morganatic second wife of Louis XIV. For a time Guyon's star rose, and she was introduced into the influential school of St. Cyr, Maintenon's pet endeavor, where she presided over a "little flock." However, her teachings on extreme indifference and the exaggerated statements of her companion, LaCombe, caused suspicion to fall on the two of them. The writings of Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos (1628–1697) had just been formally condemned in Rome. Molinos had encouraged disciples to ignore traditional virtues and religious practices in order to enter into a passive state of quietude in which the soul communing with God was believed to go beyond the need for discursive prayer and active acts of faith: mental images of Christ and all striving for perfection were seen as unnecessary to one who had achieved such perfect union. Although there was no formal school of Quietism, only an informal movement, any writings that seemed to suggest ideas similar to Molinos' could be accused of Quietism.

Madame de Maintenon, a Protestant convert, was worried about any taint of heresy and fretted over Guyon's calling herself a "stepping stone" to the divine and the spiritual mother of the flock. The queen asked Jacques-Benigne Bossuet, bishop of Meaux, to investigate. He seems to have found Guyon's use of nuptial language questionable.

LaCombe was imprisoned and Guyon confined for a time to a Parisian Visitation convent. As the investigation deepened, other ecclesiastics – notably Tronson, head of the Sulpicians, and Noilles, bishop of Chartres – were drawn into the controversy. A theological debate was held at Issy in 1695. Forced to sign a censure of thirty-four propositions, Guyon was put under house arrest and her works were formally censured. After Bossuet's death, Madame Guyon was freed and continued to pursue the vocation to which she felt she had been called. Her fame spread, especially among Protestants with Pietist sympathies. She interpreted her misfortunes as enabling her in the radical process of self-annihilation, which had as its end the possession of God alone in pure love.

François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon (1651–1715) made the acquaintance of Jeanne-Marie Guyon at the Parisian salon of Madame de Maintenon. The future archbishop was at first hesitant about the lay woman's teachings but grew convinced of her sincerity and sensed that she taught the enduring truths found in the church's mystical tradition. As a youth, Fénelon had been influenced by two uncles, associates of Olier and Vincent de Paul. At school in Paris he was tutored in Salesian devout humanism. Later studies he undertook at Saint Sulpice. Although he absorbed the spirit of the French school, Fénelon had an affinity for de Sales. After the Edict of Nantes was revoked, Fénelon spent several years preaching to the Huguenot remnant, hoping for conversions. He then served as tutor to the Dauphin's family, was elected to the Royal Academy, and made Archbishop of Cambrai.

Fénelon was drawn into the Quietist controversy when he felt that his colleagues misunderstood Madame Guyon's teachings, which were, he asserted, in continuity with the tradition of mysticism long approved by the church. His *Maxims des Saints* (1697) was composed not simply to exonerate her but to defend what he saw as the church's mystical treasury. This work, composed of quotations from tradition, including numerous references to de Sales, provides a blueprint for the mystical journey from selfish love to selfless love of God, passing through stages of love mingled with vestiges of self-interest. Fénelon wished to distinguish the classic ideas of pure love, detachment, abandonment, and holy indifference from distortions of these ideas. He stressed that spiritual trials detach one from love of self and that the further one progresses, the more passive prayer will become, culminating in union with the divine.

Rigorist moralists, including Bossuet and other clergy, some with Jansenist leanings, were in the ascendance at the time. They stressed obedience to ecclesial authority, distrusted interior experience, questioned passivity in prayer and the concept of holy indifference, felt that union with God was rare, and dismissed the possibility of perpetual prayer. At the debates at Issy, Fénelon was put on the defensive and was pressed to sign the list of censured propositions, in part because Louis XIV had become involved at the urging of Maintenon. Taken to Rome, the case was politicized and the *Maxims* condemned. Fénelon submitted to the repudiation of his work, but his reputation was tarnished. Nevertheless, he pursued his episcopal ministry with dignity until his death. The Quietist controversy dealt a deathblow to the French Catholic mystical florescence. As the cultural and religious turmoil of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century had created an opening for the mystical element of Catholicism to emerge in varying forms, so the consolidation of political, social and ecclesial power under Louis XIV went hand in hand with the closure of that opening.

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CHAPTER 30

The Making of "Mysticism" in the Anglo-American World

From Henry Coventry to William James[1]

Leigh Eric Schmidt

There is hardly a more beleaguered category than "mysticism" in the current academic study of religion. Its fall from theoretical grace has been precipitous. William R. LaFleur, for example, opens his essay on the "Body" in Mark C. Taylor's influential collection *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* with the observation that the body has utterly eclipsed mysticism as an axial term for the discipline. "Twenty or thirty years ago," LaFleur justly remarks, "the situation would have been reversed: Mysticism would have been a core term and bodies . . . would not have deserved a separate entry" (LaFleur 36). The tide began to shift in 1978 with Steven T. Katz's collection *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, and by 1983 Katz's colleague Hans H. Penner openly dismissed "mysticism" as "a false category," an essentialist "illusion" (Penner 89). Penner, in effect, set perpetual quotation marks around the term to signal the emptiness of its *sui generis* pretensions to universality and transcendence.

In 1985 philosopher Wayne Proudfoot significantly advanced this critical turn with a sustained analysis of mysticism's historical prominence as a category within the study of religion. Proudfoot charted its development from Friedrich Schleiermacher forward as part of a larger "protective strategy" designed to seal off a guarded domain for religious experience amid modernity – one in which religious feelings would be safe from reductionistic explanations and scientific incursions (Proudfoot 119–154). Proudfoot argued that scholars needed to free themselves from this Romantic theological baggage and stop securing mysticism within an autonomous, irreducible, and universal realm. Through the work of Katz, Penner, and Proudfoot, mysticism was returned to the conditioning webs of history and culture. Religious experience was no more unmediated, unique, or perennial than any other kind of experience.

A decade after Proudfoot's critique Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* offered a parallel undoing, dissecting the ways in which modern constructions of mysticism had privatized and domesticated it, the ways in which "the connection of

power and gender" had ostensibly been severed by William James and company (Jantzen 2). The modern making of mysticism, according to Jantzen, had become a way of keeping politics, materiality, embodiment, power relations, and social ethics off the scholarly table. The very depoliticization of "religious experience" was, in other words, highly political and required dismantling – an ideological unmasking that amounted soon to carnivalesque merriment (Jantzen; King; McCutcheon 1997; 2001: 4–6, 97; Fitzgerald 2000a; 2000b: 27–29, 159, 202–203). A century after James made it a favored construct in his religion of solitary epiphanies, it is safe to say that "mysticism" is a category in disrepair, sunk in the disrepute of its multiple occlusions. In *Religion after Religion*, Steven Wasserstrom even launches a neologism to concretize this growing suspicion of mysticism's long dominion within the scholarship on the History of Religions. He calls this academic fixation "mystocentrism," and "centrism" of any kind, we have known for a long while now, is a very bad thing (Wasserstrom 239–241). To join mysticism to it is intended as a death rattle.

Such critiques have much to commend them to a cultural historian of religion, since from first to last they are arguing for a radically historicist perspective. Mysticism is never essentially this or that, but instead, as Jantzen says, "a constantly shifting social and historical construction" (Jantzen 24). That very claim for history, though, needs to be extended to those who were responsible for dehistoricizing and universalizing the term in the first place. James, for example, becomes little more than a straw man in Jantzen's critique, and the larger culture of New England liberalism, which gave birth to James, is nowhere to be found in any of these critical accounts of the category's modern formation. The process of mysticism's reinvention in departicularized form needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity. If the concepts that this liberal, Transcendentalist culture bequeathed now seem threadbare or worse, it behooves us to reenter that religious world to see what negotiations animated these constructs in the first place. The critique of such scholarly categories requires, in other words, a firmer historical grounding – one that allows for better understanding even of the religious liberals who produced the models now being taken apart and gleefully discarded.

More than that, getting a closer view of the term's genealogy will also correct a major historical oversight: namely, that the development of mysticism as a modern category has been treated as having two key moments of provenance, but these are widely separated in time and are at best flimsily connected. The first period, following historian Michel de Certeau, is early seventeenth-century France in which mystical texts are said to emerge as a distinct class: that is, a new polemical discourse isolating a mystic corpus comes into being, and, with that naming, according to de Certeau, "a mystic tradition was fabricated" (de Certeau 1986: 82; 1992: 16, 76–77, 107–110). The second frame of reference (and the more pervasive one) leaps ahead to the turn of the twentieth century and focuses on such writers as James, Evelyn Underhill, Rufus Jones, Nathan Söderblum, Rudolf Otto and their considerable progeny (Kippenberg: 176–182; King: 7; Sharpe: 113–115, 188–189; Wasserstrom: 239–241; Bridges). The combination of those two genealogies, which produces a gaping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hole with only Schleiermacher to plug it, skims across many of the most important developments within the category's modern formation. Most of the

figures who actually matter in making the mysticism that the critics now suspect fall into this massive historical gap and receive little or no mention at all.[2]

Clearing the ground for the recovery of mysticism as a modern artifact is also important for making sense of how the catchall term "spirituality" has now spread itself so luxuriantly in contemporary Anglo-American culture. Mysticism, as romanticized in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, is the great foundation upon which this revived love of spirituality has been built. "The mother sea and fountain head of all religions," William James wrote in a letter in June 1901 in anticipation of his famed Gifford Lectures, "lies in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense" (James 2001: 501). Understanding how mysticism took on such a wide sense is an important step in fathoming how spirituality itself has now become such an expansive term in the religious vernacular of the twenty-first century.

"Mysticism" before Nineteenth-Century Religious Liberalism

That mysticism should come to stand, by the turn of the twentieth century, as the universal quintessence of religious experience was anything but obvious. Through the early decades of the eighteenth century, the English category of "mysticism" did not exist. The prevailing classification instead was "mystical theology," and it signified a specific devotional branch within Christian divinity. In 1656, Thomas Blount, working off a Catholic description of mystical theology from 1647, arrived at this definition for his *Glossographia*, a formative dictionary designed to elucidate "Hard Words" for fields from anatomy to divinity to mathematics: "*Mystical Theology*, is nothing else in general but certain Rules, by the practise whereof, a vertuous Christian may attain to a nearer, a more familiar, and beyond all expression comfortable conversation with God" (Blount unpaginated, s.v. "mystical"). Mystical theology, in other words, was a way of life that involved the Christian in a "constant exercise" of prayer, contemplation, and self-denial (Cressy 635–636). Blount's work, it is worth noting, contained no parallel entries for the substantive nouns *mystic* and *mysticism* (one indication that de Certeau's elliptic French genealogy cannot be extended too far). Also, among the most common associations for the term "mystical" remained its connection to biblical commentary; that is, the exegetical discernment of the internal, hidden senses of scriptural texts, the spiritual and arcane elements behind the surface of the literal. This remained evident in as basic a compendium as Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopædia* (1738), which still foregrounded "the *mystical sense* of Scripture" and "MYSTIC *theology*" and, like Blount, did not employ "mysticism" per se as a category (Chambers unpaginated, s.v. "mystical"). Through the early eighteenth century, the meanings attached to *mystic* and *mystical* were inextricably woven into a larger system of Christian theology, linked at the level of practice to a recognizable set of devotional and exegetical habits.

Mysticism, as an actual term unto itself in the English language, first crystallized within the mid-eighteenth-century critique of enthusiasm. Hints of this larger turn were apparent, for example, in Chambers's association of the mystics with unregulated spiritual impulses, "fanatic ecstasies, and amorous extravagancies" (Chambers

s.v. "mystics"). But, it was Henry Coventry (c. 1710–1752), a relatively minor player in the larger world of the English Enlightenment and a confrere of Horace Walpole and Conyers Middleton, who initially deployed the term *mysticism* as part of a sustained critique of sectarian fanaticism. In a series of dialogues entitled *Philemon to Hydaspes: Or, The History of False Religion*, the initial installment of which appeared in 1736, Coventry explicitly contrasted "the seraphic entertainments of mysticism and extasy" with the "true spirit of acceptable religion" (Coventry 56, 60). By the latter, he meant a liberal and reasonable commitment to civic virtue, cosmopolitan toleration, public decorum, and aesthetic proportion. Religion, rightly practiced, was "a liberal, manly, rational, and social institution," and the "deluded votaries" of mysticism had no place in that world of calm rationality, moderated passions, and refined tastes (Coventry 44). The term was thus socially situated within debates about the fundamental comportment of religious people: were they to carry themselves with the genteel gravity of Cambridge divines and dons or the bumptious assurance of Quakers and Methodists?

Coventry certainly shared in wider Enlightenment suspicions of false religion as a product of credulity, imposture, fear, the ignorance of natural causes, and euhemerism, and his other dialogues tapped into all of those explanations at one point or another. His account of mysticism, though, was more original and sharp-edged. Probing for its erotic psychology, Coventry went farther than the usual sexualizing of enthusiasts, epitomized in the prurience and wit of Jonathan Swift who, in his *Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* (1704), had richly satirized the "*ogling*" and "*orgasmus*" of Quaker spiritual exercises (Swift 140–141). Whereas Swift dwelled on the grossly sensuous parallels between spiritual zeal and earthly lust, Coventry, in a move that historians of the study of religion have failed to credit, developed an inchoate theory of sublimation and projection to explain the amorous qualities of "mystical dissoluteness" (Coventry 55). In contrast to Hume's emphasis on the passions of fear and hope as the origins of false religion and in contrast to the commonplace linkage of enthusiasm with melancholy, Coventry concentrated on the unruly passion of love and its wildly illusory distortions among those of "warm and sanguine tempers" (Coventry 48).

In Coventry's analysis, the great source of all mystical devotion was "disappointed love": The frustrated passion is "transferred from mere mortals to a spiritual and divine object, and love . . . is sublimated into devotion" (Coventry 47). That divine object was necessarily "an imaginary and artificial" contrivance, a mistaken substitute, a product of the "wantonest appetites and wishes" (Coventry 51, 61). In working from the perspective of the passions, which were understood to be stronger and more predominant in women, Coventry marked mysticism as primarily female with a spirituality of sublimated sexuality making up "the far greatest part of female religion" (Coventry 55). He found such displacement of the sensual doubly sad; it was both a religious illusion and a loss of the genuine tactile pleasures of "connubial love" (Coventry 121). What devout women really suffered from, one of Coventry's male interlocutors winked to another, was "the want of timely application from our sex" (Coventry 51). Such analysis fully anticipated the intellectual "fashion" that James would later complain about in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902: namely, "criticising the religious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual life" (James 1982: 10).[3]

Critical efforts, like Coventry's, effectively interlaced mysticism and enthusiasm and increasingly demoted mystical theology from the center of learned discussion. *Mysticism* thus came into being in Anglo-American discourse as a term charged with the reproaches of misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-be-damned extravagance. As Bishop William Warburton concluded contemptuously of devotionalist William Law, who had taken a perverse liking to the esoteric writings of the seventeenth-century pietist Jacob Boehme, "When I reflect on the wonderful infatuation of this ingenious man, who has spent a long life in hunting after, and, with an incredible appetite, devouring, the trash dropt from every species of Mysticism, it puts me in mind of what Travellers tell us of a horrid Fanaticism in the east, where the Devotee makes a solemn vow never to taste of other food than what has passed through the entrails of some impure or Savage Animal" (Warburton 223). Mysticism was, in short, one more excremental waste in the making of an enlightened, reasonable religion. If such critical uses of the terms *mystical* and *mysticism* did not ultimately measure up as Enlightenment diagnostics of false religion to priestcraft, enthusiasm, fanaticism, and fetishism, they certainly took their rise from the same impulse that propelled the other categories to prominence: the growing desire to provide a natural history of religious error. Yet even as mysticism was generalized into a more widely recognizable form of false religion, it was marked by a specific Anglican politics of ecclesiastical containment, aimed especially at high-flying devotionalists and inspired women.

Another noteworthy aspect of the term's eighteenth-century transit is the way that philosophers and encyclopedists worked to narrow its signification. When *mysticism* came to have a life of its own apart from mystical theology and biblical commentary, it initially took on sectarian as much as universal connotations. The Roman Catholic polemic against the mystical practices of Quietists, a discursive formation that de Certeau highlighted for the seventeenth century, gained a new importance, enjoying a vital afterlife during the Enlightenment and even beyond it. Readily absorbed into Pierre Bayle's learned republic of letters, that discourse provided the basis for the construal of the mystics as a particular sect of Christians, a definable group of pious (if misguided) souls, a fanatic clique that stood in sharp contrast to enlightened cosmopolitans. The modern mystics, though sometimes imagined as part of a stream that flowed back to Origen and Dionysius the Areopagite, were increasingly presented as a small club with a few exemplary members, especially William Law, Jacob Boehme, Jeanne Marie Guyon, Antoinette Bourignon, Miquel de Molinos, Francois Fénelon, and Pierre Poiret. In William Hurd's *New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Whole World: Or, A Complete and Impartial View of All Religions*, published in 1782, the "Account of the Mystics" was placed toward the end of his massive volume, tucked into accounts of other "smaller sects" such as the Muggletonians and French Prophets (Hurd 670–1). The mystics were, in sum, just another narrow sect, among many, prickling gentlemanly forms of established Christianity and enlightened learning. Guilty of various absurdities, the mystics were, in Hurd's mind, clearly identifiable with a small group of French Quietists and their misbegotten English successors.

That factional understanding was encapsulated in the 1797 entry on "Mystics" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*: "MYSTICS . . . a kind of religious sect, distinguished by

their professing pure, sublime, and perfect devotion, with an entire disinterested love of God, free from all selfish considerations . . . The principles of this sect were adopted by those called *Quietists* in the seventeenth century, and under different modifications, by the Quakers and Methodists" (12: 598). Enlightenment encyclopedists rarely followed Coventry's lead in universalizing "mystic" and "mysticism" as part of a sweeping critique of false religion; they were largely uninterested in using these terms as global constructs in ways akin to the new eighteenth-century uses of "shaman" and "shamanism" or "fetish" and "fetishism." Instead, they preferred to keep the purview of "mystic" and "mysticism" much more contained by making them party labels for a singular brand of recent enthusiasts and pietists. In effect, they handed the palm from mystical theology to the mystics–an often amorous, always muddle-headed sect who, for all of their devout fancies, were too absorbed with an arcane jargon to be overly dangerous.

Such English usages readily crossed the Atlantic. Hannah Adams's compendious *Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations*, which went through four editions between 1784 and 1817, offered a more far-ranging account of mystics and mysticism than Hurd's parallel volume, but it nonetheless trotted out the same select club of "modern mystics" (Adams 188–190). In the first edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary* in 1828, the narrow sectarian meaning was front and center: "MYSTICS, n. A religious sect who profess to have direct intercourse with the Spirit of God," and mysticism was explicitly joined to "the doctrine of the Mystics, who profess a pure, sublime and perfect devotion, wholly disinterested" (*Webster* unpaginated: s.v. "mysticism" and "mystics"). Those habits of classification died hard. As late as 1872, when Vincent Milner published his *Religious Denominations of the World*, the mystics continued to be listed as a small sect with the same French and English progenitors (Milner 362–365). They remained as distinguishable, in Milner's taxonomy, as Baptists or Buddhists, if minuscule in number by comparison.

For all the eighteenth-century critique and containment of mysticism, it remained a controversial term in which counter-Enlightenment significations very much survived and provided a basis for nineteenth-century redirections and expansions. Hence the English divine Thomas Hartley, in his *Short Defense of the Mystical Writers* in 1764, explicitly challenged the captious pigeonholing of the mystics: "Let it here be remarked, and constantly remembered, that the true Mystics are not to be taken for a sect or party in the church, or to be considered as separatists from it, for they renounce all such distinctions both in name and deed, being the only people that never formed a sect" (Hartley 373). By Hartley's account, "mystical means nothing more nor less than spiritual," and the mystics were the bearers in all ages of "the spirituality of true religion" (Hartley 358, 377). Eighteenth-century defenders, rescuers, and practitioners of mystical theology – from William Law and Thomas Hartley to John Fletcher, Francis Okely, and Ezra Stiles – worked all along against the grain of larger Enlightenment critiques and provided an esoteric platform for the nineteenth-century revival of mysticism as the fountainhead of all genuine spirituality. Such writers crossed a wide religious spectrum – sometimes Anglican, sometimes Moravian, sometimes Methodist, sometimes Reformed, sometimes Swedenborgian – but all were dissenters from the Enlightenment critique of the mystical writers. They, in effect, prefigured the

counter-Enlightenment vanguard of William Blake and Friedrich Schleiermacher (Young 120–163; Grasso 264–269).

It is important to underline, too, that "Enlightenment" and "counter-Enlightenment" were not a chiaroscuro, but, more often than not, shades of gray. Even many of the makers of a Protestant Enlightenment were likely to give credit to mysticism for its cultivation of an inward piety. In his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) the natural philosopher and Unitarian thinker Joseph Priestley, for example, said that he was "ashamed" as a Christian to see what kind of bodily "austerities" and scriptural "perversions" some of the earliest mystics had practiced in Christ's name (Priestley 5: 350). These horrid "*bodily exercises*" in which the flesh was tormented for the good of the soul were dismissed as both Platonist and Catholic vices (Priestley 5:354). But, mysticism still mattered in Priestley's enlightened Protestant history as a flawed vessel of true interiority, which some mystics had managed to preserve in the face of all the vulgar superstitions of pagans and Catholics. "For though the ideas of the Mystics were very confused," Priestley concluded, "they had a notion of the necessity of aiming at something of *inward purity*, distinct from all ritual observances" (Priestley 5: 354–535). That was a distinction that liberal universalists and Romantic reclaimers could get their minds around, if not their bodies. Even some gentlemanly critics of their absurdities and austerities were ready to grant that the mystics contained within them the "sparks of real piety" and that they served, in effect, as clandestine prognosticators of pure religious interiority amid the dark ages of superstition (Priestley 5: 355). Priestley would hardly be the last liberal Protestant to desire a mysticism without ritual practices and without ascetic disciplines.

Mysticism Becomes "the Romance of Religion"

If the ongoing editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are taken as a measure – and they are certainly a good and relevant one when it comes to category formation – then the next major shift in the Anglo-American discourse on mysticism took place in the 1840s and 1850s. Through the sixth and seventh editions, which ran from 1823 to 1842, the entries on "mystics" closely follow the eighteenth-century form and sectarian pedigree. It is with the eighth edition of 1858 that "mysticism" finally replaces "mystics" and that the term is well launched on its eclectic, universal path. If still marked with an enthusiast stamp as a "form of error . . . which mistakes the operations of a merely human faculty for a Divine manifestation," it was now something much grander than a peculiar party within Christianity (15: 755). "Its main characteristics are constantly the same," the entry insisted, "whether they find expression in the Bagvat-Gita of the Hindu, or in the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg" (15: 755). Mysticism thus becomes a global species of religious experience with innumerable subspecies, historical, geographic, and national: Oriental mysticism, Neo-Platonic mysticism, Greek mysticism, German mysticism, Persian mysticism, Spanish mysticism, and French Quietism. Also, in a category unto himself and indicative of his singular prominence in the mid-nineteenth-century remaking of mysticism was the eighteenth-century visionary Emanuel Swedenborg, who had chatted up angels as readily he had

courtiers and philosophers. "Nothing really new in the way of mysticism," the entry concluded, "has been produced since the days of the northern seer" (15: 758). If Swedenborg's fortunes subsequently shifted (he was soon read out of the *Britannica*'s canon of mystics and reassigned to Spiritualist ranks), mysticism's universalistic destiny now appeared set.

The remapping of mysticism in the second third of the nineteenth century was a product of a cosmopolitan literature – part historical, part poetic, part philosophical – and it was evident in a variety of cultural incarnations. The absolutely critical source for this particular remapping in the *Britannica* was Robert Alfred Vaughan's two-volume compendium, *Hours with the Mystics*, first published in London in 1856. An English Dissenter of a literary, meditative, and melancholy cast, Vaughan (1823–1857) had come around to the ministry by way of his father's example and "the lone dark room of the artist" (Vaughan 1858: 1: xvii). He spent long hours wooing poetry as a youth, but he soon turned to writing theological essays, including one on Origen and another on Schleiermacher, as preparation for his work on his favored subject. Setting up his great opus as a series of genteel conversations among friends, Vaughan had his interlocutors leisurely pursue "mysticism" as it had found expression "among different nations and at different periods" (Vaughan 1888: 1: 21). The summary overview that the *Britannica* offered in 1858 was essentially a miniaturized replica of Vaughan's panoramic perspective; it directly borrowed much of his phrasing, his categories, and his summary estimates. With its mix of critical, appreciative, and diverting voices, Vaughan's work remained hard to pin down, sometimes sorting out the chaff, other times happily harvesting the fruits of medieval mysticism, at points losing its way in chatty nonchalance.[4] Still, it was Vaughan, above all, who opened the way for the popularization of "mysticism" as a conduit into "the highest form of spirituality" (Vaughan 1888: 2: 351).

That formative influence acknowledged, Vaughan's work hardly stood alone: The German histories, especially in their recovery of pre-Reformation materials, were especially voluminous. These included substantial works on *Die christliche Mystik* by Johann Heinroth, Joseph von Görres, Ludwig Noack, and Adolph Helfferich, all published between 1830 and 1853. The French sources were prominent as well, notably Victor Cousin's philosophical account of mysticism that further helped universalize the category, even as it critiqued the putative sacrifice of reason and liberty that mysticism everywhere entailed. Here was a "desperate and ambitious dream" of divine intercourse, Cousin suggested, that demanded the intellectual cautions of empiricism and skepticism wherever it was encountered, east or west (Cousin 103). Scholars of Islamic devotion made their mark, too, particularly through Edward Henry Palmer's *Oriental Mysticism* (1867), a learned text that came to play a vital part in the budding Anglo-American attraction to Sufism at the end of the century.

The American contributions, while barely alluded to in the *Britannica* entry of 1858, were also noteworthy. At one point, for example, Vaughan tried out a new definition for mysticism, bubbling that "Mysticism is *the romance of religion*," and none of his immediate contemporaries more personified this turn than "Mr. Emerson, the American essayist" (Vaughan 1888: 1: 27; 2: 8). "Whether in prose or verse," Vaughan wrote, "he is chief singer of his time at the high court of Mysticism" (Vaughan 1888:

2: 8). Vaughan's high appraisal of Emerson points in the right direction for tracking mysticism's modern transformation, especially in the United States. Transcendentalist New England provides a good case study of both the larger processes and local peculiarities that remade mysticism in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and America. It is certainly the critical place to look in order to locate the formation of an American religious culture that produced both William James's theorizing and the riotous desires for more and more books on mysticism. The United States was a country, a critic sighed in 1906, where "mysticism" and "a craving for spiritual experiences" had "run mad" (Anon. 332).

New England Unitarianism, with its large debt to Enlightenment rationality, was an unlikely seedbed for the making of modern mysticism. As the *Christian Examiner*, a flagship periodical of this ultra-liberal Protestant movement, proudly declared, "What sect has protested so loudly against all mysticism, whether of thought or feeling?" (Fenn 203). And yet it was precisely in these liberal circles, especially those gravitating toward the Transcendentalist orbit, that mysticism as a construct gained a new currency in American religious and intellectual life. On May 20, 1838 the Transcendental Club, a symposium of Unitarian ministers and intellectuals formed in 1836 to discuss the philosophical and religious scene, met specifically to take up "the question of Mysticism" (Emerson 1965, 502; Myerson 202). Bronson Alcott was effusive about the conversation, which went on long into the night and included such luminaries in the making as Theodore Parker, Jones Very, George Ripley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson: "On the main topic of conversation, much was said," Alcott noted in his journal, "Was Jesus a mystic? Most deemed him such, in the widest sense. He was spiritual . . . He used the universal tongue, and was intelligible to all men of simple soul" (Carlson 232–233). Alcott himself was especially voluble on the topic of mysticism and feared that he had "overstepped the bounds of true courtesy" by talking too much (233). Still, as he said, "A vision was vouchsafed, and I could but declare it" (233). Emerson, by contrast, was fearful that he had been "a bad associate" at the gathering, "since for all the wit & talent that was there, I had not one thought nor one aspiration" (Emerson 1965: 502). Trying to quiet this tiny pang of intellectual insecurity, Emerson offered an excuse: "It is true I had not slept the night before" (502). The all-night discussion of mysticism apparently did nothing to relieve his sluggish frame of mind.

Soon enough, though, Emerson revived himself and warmed to the topic. The next year he and Alcott spent a December afternoon discussing Swedenborg, Boehme, Plotinus, among others in "this sublime school" (Alcott 1938: 136). Such interests lingered long for both men: Emerson went on to write an influential essay that presented Emanuel Swedenborg as the representative mystic of the ages, the "largest of all modern souls" (Emerson 1996: 76). Emerson's praise was hardly unqualified: Swedenborg lacked poetry, tremulous emotion, and sufficient individualism and was finally too reliant on scripture and Christian symbolism for Emerson's taste. But, the larger estimate of Swedenborg as mystical summit took the better measure of Transcendentalist fascinations with the seer. Whether for Walt Whitman or Henry James Sr., no one surpassed Swedenborg as the new archetype of mysticism. For his part, Alcott tracked mysticism in all quarters, issuing his own "Orphic sayings" in the *Dial* and eventually amassing a library of hundreds of volumes on "mystic and theosophic lore" (Versluis

153–154; Cameron 66). "Mysticism," Alcott sweepingly concluded in *Concord Days* in 1872, "is the sacred spark that has lighted the piety and illuminated the philosophy of all places and times" (Alcott 1872: 237). As late as 1882, he was still in hot pursuit of such universal teachings, even founding what he called a "Mystic Club" to provide a focus for corporate study and reflection (Alcott 1938: 530). Though short-lived, the Mystic Club stood as an emblematic fulfillment of this Transcendentalist ferment, which was by then a half-century in the making.

Fellow traveler Margaret Fuller, though not at the Transcendental Club meeting in 1838 where mysticism was the focus of discussion, shared the enthusiasm of Alcott and Emerson. By 1840, she too was immersed in her own religious investigations, declaring herself "more and more what they will call a mystic" and announcing that she was ready to preach "mysticism" (Lott 3–4, 58). In her formidable work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Fuller imagined such religious exaltation as an essential vehicle for the progress and elevation of women, a primal source of "spiritual dignity" (Fuller 167). "Mysticism, which may be defined as the brooding soul of the world, cannot fail," she insisted, "of its oracular promise as to Woman" (Fuller 167). In Transcendentalist hands the term was clearly being dislodged from both its Catholic and Enlightenment roots. It was neither an ancient form of Christian divinity nor part of a critique of enthusiasm and sectarianism; instead, it was becoming loosely spiritual, intuitive, emancipatory, and universal.

Another exemplar of this Romantic turn is Samuel Johnson, whose Transcendentalist reveries in "the serene, spiritual moonlight" of the early 1840s carried him through Harvard Divinity School and launched him on his lifelong study of Asian religions (Johnson 12). As his memoirist remarked, Johnson's meditations "began soon to take on a *mystical* phase, which led him into some deep experiences" (Johnson 14). "This phase lasted but a short time; yet a very effervescent state it was while it lasted" (Johnson 18). In these New England circles, mysticism was being reconstructed at both practical and abstract levels as a domain of esoteric insight and religious exploration. For the first time, Americans had a definable club of self-proclaimed mystics all their own, a group ready at a moment's notice, as Fuller's memoir reported of her ecstasies, to "plunge into the sea of Buddhism and mystical trances" (Emerson et al. 1:308).

More sustained reflection soon emerged in these New England circles and even extended to those otherwise wary of the Transcendentalist ferment. Henry Ware Jr., writing for the *Christian Examiner* in 1844, lifted up mysticism for the considered attention of all "rational Christians" (Ware 316). "There is, perhaps, no one element of religion to which Ecclesiastical history has done so little justice," Ware suggested (Ware 311). Predictably cautious in his reclamation, he remained dismissive of "rude and unenlightened" forms of mysticism, including the "Fetichism" of devotions aimed at "outward objects" and the somatic tortures of "self-inflicted penance and scourgings" (Ware 309, 311). Ware, like Priestley before him, wanted a rarefied mysticism – one stripped of ritual and material symbols, one without a body to deny or embrace, to bleed or lactate. "Now," he averred, "as a higher stage in spiritual life has been reached, we find the mysticism of religious experience" (Ware 310). That was a phrase reminiscent of Schleiermacher and worthy of James. "We have used the word mysticism in a wider than its usual signification," Ware concluded, rightly highlighting the innovations

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of the era, "but what is mysticism but the striving of the soul after God, the longing of the finite for communion with the Infinite" (Ware 310). "Without it," he insisted, "there is, and there can be no religion" (Ware 314).

Two other figures in these New England Unitarian circles were important intermediaries for the Romantic construct of mysticism: first, Octavius Frothingham, an architect of the Free Religious Association, an organization that pursued the distillation of a universal faith through the wide-ranging study of religion, and, second, James Freeman Clarke, a founding figure in the field of comparative religions at Harvard Divinity School and the author of a much heralded text on the *Ten Great Religions*, which made its appearance in two parts in 1871 and 1883. Frothingham and Clarke both tended the mystic flame in its transit from the first Transcendentalist glimmerings to the blaze of fascination at the end of the century. Frothingham imagined the future religion of the United States as a liberal, universal one of the spirit, not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, sacramental, or sectarian, post-Protestant as much as post-Catholic (Frothingham 1891: 115–132, 272–288). Mysticism became the connecting thread of that universal religion; it is, Frothingham said, "peculiar to no sect of believers, to no church, to no religion; it is found equally among orthodox and heterodox, Protestants and Catholics, Pagans and Christians, Greeks and Hindoos, the people of the Old World and the people of the New" (Frothingham 1861: 202; 1982: 249–283, 303–304). Clarke seconded that line of observation in "The Mystics in All Religions," a lecture he delivered in 1880 and then published a year later. The mystic "sees through the shows of things to their centre, becomes independent of time and space, master of his body and mind, ruler of nature by the sight of her inmost laws, and elevated above all partial religions into the Universal Religion. This is the essence of mysticism" (Clarke 276).

The groundwork had now been laid at Harvard for James's use of the construct in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. "The everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition," James averred, is "hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note" (James 1982: 419). Frothingham and Clarke, as James would too, made mysticism universal and timeless by turning it into solitary subjectivity and largely shearing it of distinct practices. "The mystic is only by rare exception," Frothingham insisted, "a ritualist or a sacramentalist" (Frothingham 1861: 212). Mysticism provided "a psychology" that served as a basis for spiritual union, a transcultural and transhistorical "intuitive faculty" that allowed for an interior recognition of the Divine Essence (Frothingham 1861: 203–204). Such experiences were imagined as a basis for moving beyond theological differences, for dissolving them in a unifying sea of cosmic consciousness.

When turned into an essence and a universal, mysticism rapidly lost much of its grounding in history, cultural particularity, and place. Charles Morris Addison made that loss crystal clear, when he bluntly asserted in *The Theory and Practice of Mysticism* in 1918: "A history of Mysticism is an impossibility. It has no history . . . It appears, like Melchisedec, without a genealogy" (Addison 106). Vaughn at his more effusive had made much the same claim about the spontaneity of mystical feeling: "Mysticism has no genealogy," a brisk pronouncement that makes explicit the very genealogy behind the denial of a historical genealogy to mystical experience (Vaughan 1888: 1: 54). Also,

the pursuit of a core of mystical experience seemed not only to dissolve history, but also to render social obligation an expendable part of mysticism. If, as Frothingham insisted, "genuine spirituality" must still go "into the street" and not seek the cloister, it would have been a point increasingly easy to elude (Frothingham 1861: 229). The desire, above all, was for the poetry and not the politics of mysticism, the romance and not the regimen: "We love the mystics for their inward, not for their outward life; because they lift us up above the world, not because they make us faithful in it," Frothingham averred (Frothingham 1861: 229). "There are others, and enough of them, who will keep us up to that. We crave more mist and moonlight in America; and that the mystics give to us" (229). Thus the term, in being shorn of a genealogy, also seemed in imminent danger of losing its grounding in ethical practice, in socially sanctified lives.

Returning History to the Historyless

All of these social and historical denials, of course, provide more fodder for the critics: This Transcendentalist Unitarian story, in effect, puts historical flesh on the skeletons in James's closet. It is not enough, though, simply to offer historical substantiation and specificity for the suspicions that critics already harbor (and sometimes belabor). Why, after all, did these religious liberals make the choices they made? Were these positions simply the embarrassing misdirections that many scholars now take them to be? What possessed these Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and other liberal religionists to take these stands, which so long affected the study of religion and now seem so misguided?

First of all, and most obviously, they were looking for an anti-positivist, anti-materialist tool to use against "the fierce onward current of purely scientific thought," and mysticism served as an intellectual shield in that fight against what they saw as untrammeled scientism and naturalism (Webster 367). To make claims about the uniqueness or universality of mystical experience, about its irreducibility in the face of medical materialism, was certainly defensive, but few imagined the study of religion, even in its scientific form, as a wholly dispassionate, value-free field of inquiry. In James's apt phrase, he sought in his treatment of mysticism to be "as objective and receptive as I can" (James 1982: 379). Abstracted scrutiny did not, for James, exclude responsive openness. There were intellectual battles to be both fought and mediated, not least in the growing strife between science and religion, and the study of mysticism was necessarily intended to be part of those negotiations, not to float free above the fray. "Never was there an age," one anonymous essayist insisted in 1878, "when what is true in Mysticism needed emphatic assertion more than it does to-day. The general drift of thought is antagonistic to the spiritual and the eternal. Science, and by this word is generally understood the material and economic province, absorbs in itself all thought and investigation" (Anon. 1878: 412). The modern construction of mysticism as a category was very much grounded in a particular set of cultural negotiations over the reality and unreality of the spiritual world. It was intended to engage, not sidestep, those metaphysical questions; so, paradoxically enough, it was exactly the *sui generis* rhetoric that made "mysticism" timely, not timeless.

Second, the American writers on the topic faced the ragged divisions of the pre- and post-Civil War periods and were, in part, seeking a religious vision to serve the national cause of political and religious union. Frothingham, for one, made it plain that the issues of disunion were crucial to his reflections on the future religion of the United States (Frothingham 1891: 115–132). These divisions whetted his desires to discern a transcendent spirit that would override knotted sectional differences, admittedly on Yankee terms. Unitarian Charles C. Everett, a Harvard professor of theology who took up Clarke's mantle in comparative religions, wrote of mysticism in 1874 as having "to do with wholes," with the common and the unifying (Everett 23). "The word mysticism, whenever properly used," he said, "refers to the fact that all lives, however distinct they may appear, however varied may be there conditions and their ends, are at heart one" (Everett 8). For Everett, no more sublime exemplar of this "mystical view of life" could be adduced than "our martyred president, Abraham Lincoln," a truly "tender and heroic soul" who stood for the universal against "modern atomism" (Everett 8, 10–11). Such meditations are instructively connected to Steven Wasserstrom's discernment of interlocking forms of "spiritual nationalism" in the mystical absorptions of Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, and Henry Corbin in the Cold War era (Wasserstrom 6). The Unitarian Transcendentalist fascination with a universalistic mysticism could serve parallel purposes for a New England vision of capturing a holy union out of the rubble of rival nationalisms, north and south.

Third, the makers of mysticism faced up to the dawning religious pluralism not only as a challenge to the solidity of Christian identity, but also as an opportunity for self-exploration and cross-cultural understanding. The expansion of mysticism as a category, however naïve about an underlying sameness and ecumenical harmony, was a means of interreligious engagement – a sympathetic meeting point in an increasingly global encounter of religions. As a construct, mysticism opened up more conversations than it foreclosed them through essentialism, becoming one of the key conceptual bridges that made possible innumerable religious crossings and contacts in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (and beyond). Such cosmopolitan ferment was evident time and again in the diverse doings of the Transcendental Club (1836), the Free Religious Association (1867), the Theosophical Society (1875), the World's Parliament of Religions (1893), as well as the Montsalvat School for the Comparative Study of Religion, founded by Sarah Farmer in Eliot, Maine, as part of her Green Acre community (1894). A dialogic model had governed Vaughan's foundational text for the configuration of the new mysticism, and it remained a standard resource into the 1880s and 1890s. His interlocutors chewed on different definitions, roamed across religious and cultural borders, and seriously pondered philosophical critiques of religion, even as they romanticized the mystical. No doubt this modern construction of mysticism was part an Orientalist strategy of appropriation and part a vision of union solely on liberal Protestant terms, but it also served as a category to open up dialogic possibilities across cultures and traditions – openings that would ultimately call into question the presumptions of the very religious liberalism that had facilitated such exchanges in the first place. The social, political, and theological convictions embedded in "mysticism" so conceived provided bridges of sympathy, which, it would seem, marked an improvement on the bombardments of colonialism and the boastings of Christian missiology.

Still, the very openness of that interreligious exchange always had its limits, and the more freewheeling the conversation appeared, the more likely a critical retrenchment became. By the early twentieth century, many of the leading writers on mysticism – Rufus Jones, Evelyn Underhill, Cuthbert Butler, James Pratt, Charles Addison, John Wright Buckham, among others – were trying to sharpen their focus of study through drawing a sharp boundary between "normal" and "abnormal" experiences. For all the Romantic universalism upon which they built and notwithstanding James's psychical research, most of these writers wanted nothing to do with occultists, magi, clairvoyants, mediums, "weird psychical experiences," or "easy-going lotus eaters" (Butler lxii, 3–4; Jones 1931: xii). Drawing that line became all the more a fixation as theosophical and occultist claims on mysticism grew in force in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American culture. Mysticism, Rufus Jones insisted, "does not mean something 'occult,' or 'esoteric,' or 'gnostic,' or 'pseudo-psychic'" (Jones 1927: 25). These scholars went to great rhetorical lengths to insist that neither they nor the mystics they loved were Hermeticists, spiritualists, or magicians in waiting. At the same time, Jones and company had little more than dismissive contempt for the somatic and visionary dimensions of devotional practices. Mysterious voices, strange sights, bodily oozings, and fleshly mortifications were freakish sideshows compared to an abstracted experience of divine union, an immediate consciousness of God's presence, or a contemplative intuition of the Absolute.[5] Addison's analogy for disjoining normal from abnormal mysticism was especially telling: "Homo-sexuality is not love. There is normal and abnormal love, and so there is a normal and an abnormal Mysticism" (Addison 30). The religious conversations and cross-cultural exchanges that modern constructions of mysticism enabled were real, but they still came with very clear limits and sharply invidious comparisons with occult decadence.

Fourth, while ostensibly disclaiming history, most of the works produced on mysticism were actually richly historical. Vaughan was an industrious collector of sources as was Clarke, and a flood of new editions of mystical writers poured forth from the presses in the second half of the nineteenth century. At some level, the theoretical commitment to a timeless mysticism foundered on the diligent pursuit of the lives and writings of specific mystics. To be sure, these inquirers often snared themselves in the bind of mysticism as monotony. As Charles Addison almost comically confessed, "When you see [mysticism] here or there, early or late, you feel perfectly at home with it. You say, 'Here is the same old thing.' It suffers a little, perhaps, from sameness" (Addison 150). And certainly the History of Religions as a field of inquiry would as often as not be expressly anti-historical: "No mere inquiry into the genesis of a thing," Rudolf Otto would insist, "can throw any light upon its essential nature, and it is hence immaterial to us how mysticism historically arose" (Otto 22). Yet, difference and history were both inescapable; even Addison emphasized how "very various" and "how different" mystics were across time and space (Addison 151). "There are no 'pure experiences,'" Rufus Jones observed pointblank in 1909; all are produced within a specific "social and intellectual environment" (Jones 1909: xxxiv). Historical particularity proved inexorable and was often embraced outright. One in-house critic of liberal views of mysticism cautioned in 1897 against vain attempts "to construct a universal religion": "The Messiah of universalism will fulfill and not destroy the prophets of particularism," he

insisted (Fenn 201). He found all the talk of discovering through mysticism a grand "sympathy" among all religions to be "a huge cloud of thin but amiable sentiment befogging the intellect" (Fenn 201).

Finally, even on the vexed question of whether these liberal Protestant writers rendered mysticism ethically vapid and snugly privatized, the answer is again not so obvious. Frothingham's counsel that "genuine spirituality goes into the street" was to be taken seriously (Frothingham 1861: 229), and much of the liberal writing on mysticism came to focus precisely on activism, on the "fusion of mystic communion with ethical passion" (Peabody 476). William James himself, whose conceptions Jantzen characterizes as privatizing and domesticating, was actually energetically activist, impatient with any equation of mysticism with a gospel of repose. Even a slightly more generous reading of James makes it clear that he was not bequeathing "mysticism" or "religious experience" as categories divorced from social ethics and public-mindedness. James's pragmatism sought, as he said, "to redeem religion from unwholesome privacy" and confer upon it "public status" through scientific investigation (James 1982: 432–433). His consistent measure of religious experience was its fruits, its production of saintliness and active habits. James imagined mystical experience as a way to unleash energy, to find the hot place of human initiative and endeavor, and to encourage the heroic, the strenuous, and the vital.

James had much company on this point. The Quaker Rufus Jones, who followed in James's footsteps and became one of the most prolific American writers on mysticism, characterized mystics as "hundred-horsepower" men and "tremendous transmitters of energy" (Jones 1927: 52, 55). The mystics were the great athletes of the spirit. It would be ill conceived to think that James, Jones, and their wider liberal Protestant company domesticated, privatized, or feminized mysticism; instead, they did precisely the opposite. Gender, indeed, mattered deeply, but in the reverse of what Jantzen and other critics suspect. Margaret Fuller's dissenting voice notwithstanding, mysticism was not made "feminine" in these liberal circles, but was rehabilitated on mostly "masculine" terms. Ascetically disciplined, visionary saints served, in James's express phrasing, as enviable embodiments of "manlier indifference," "the more athletic trim," and "the moral fighting shape" and stood in contrast to the "effeminacy and unmanliness" of "our age" (James 1982: 365, 368). Hence Charles Addison's estimate of St. Francis: He was never weak, but restlessly intense, "gentle indeed but virile" (Addison 113). Even Evelyn Underhill indulged in this rugged, muscular rhetoric; the mystics were "a race of adventurers," "heroic examples" of the spiritual life (Underhill 41).

On closer inspection, then, the argument that the modern categories of "religious experience" and "mysticism" effectively disconnected spirituality from issues of social equity and power relations does not hold up very well. Fuller heralded the emancipatory potential of mysticism for women; James sang the praises of saintly charity as a transformative social force; and Rufus Jones tirelessly insisted on the practical social implications of a revived mysticism, which he himself lived out in his long dedication to the relief work of the Religious Society of Friends. Time and again, social-gospel Protestants were adamant about the inseparability of mysticism and political activism, religious experience and arduous saintliness, contemplation and efficiency, prayers and pickets. In his book *Mysticism and Modern Life*, published in 1915, Methodist John

Wright Buckham made the connections to the social and industrial awakening explicit with his category of "social mysticism." Buckham drew a sharp line on this point: Active service to others was actually a requirement to be considered under his tendentious heading of "Normal Mysticism" (Buckham 154, 244). Subsequently, the Quaker Howard H. Brinton underscored this whole trajectory with his stress on the historical study of "ethical mysticism," a designation he borrowed from Albert Schweitzer (Brinton 5). It is safe to say that the current desire to reconnect Christian spiritual practices and social justice, so evident in Jantzen's work itself, is an extension of liberal absorptions, not a correction of them. It is also safe to say that the "mystocentrism" of these various American interpreters cannot be linked to the production of what Wasserstrom has impugned within the History of Religions as "a monotheism without ethics" (Wasserstrom 5, 225–236).

Leaning too heavily on the recent critiques may well do historians more harm than good since it effectively diverts attention from the existential intensity of these liberal religious worlds that invested so much in mysticism. The construct mattered to its liberal devotees because of the despair it could potentially assuage, the questions of meaning it hoped to answer, and the divided selves it tried to make whole. It requires neither protectiveness nor nostalgia to insist that the crises of belief and personal identity, which haunted James and his wider circle, deserve intensive historical engagement. Without the immediacy of James's question "Is Life Worth Living?," without the religious yearning and "quivering fear" in James's own breakdown, without the echo in his own father's confused and meandering faith, without the deadened emotions of James's philosophical melancholy, the historian is doomed to grope unseeingly in this religious culture (James 1982: 160; Levinson 25–32). Historians need to grapple anew with the seriousness of these narratives of desire in which mysticism holds primary interest as part of a search for a living experience of God. "I have no living sense of commerce with a God," James wrote. "I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly . . . I have grown so out of Christianity that entanglement therewith on the part of a mystical utterance has to be abstracted from and overcome before I can listen. Call this, if you like, my mystical *germ*" (Pratt 233–234). A canny awareness of "the politics of nostalgia" should not serve as an excuse to trivialize the quandaries that produced James's envy and necessitated his abstractions in the first place (McCutcheon 1997: 27–35).

In his *Recollections*, published in 1909, Washington Gladden, a titan among liberal Protestant thinkers and activists, tried to specify "the changes, which have taken place within the last sixty years in our conceptions of what is essential in religious experience" (Gladden 38). He recalled "so many nights, when the house was still, looking out through the casement upon the unpitying stars . . . a soul in great perplexity and trouble because it could not find God" (Gladden 36). The loss of mystical experience had become "my problem," he reported, as he had come to live with a Christianity without raptures, without "marked and easily recognizable emotional experience" (Gladden 37–38). For James and those within the wider milieu of liberal Protestantism, the preserve of mysticism was only secondarily about protecting religion from its cultured despisers. It was primarily a construct formed of lacking and loss, an emptied space of longing for "a heightened, intensified way of life," a search for "an *undivided*

whole of experience" in a world experienced in increasingly fragmented and alienated terms (Jones 1915: 161, 165). Rufus Jones commented in 1915 that he and his contemporaries were in the midst of "a profound revival of interest in Mysticism," but not "a distinct revival of Mysticism itself" (Jones 155). Previous revivals, he said, had been led by "luminous mystics" and "first-hand prophets of mystical religion," this one by second-hand historians and psychologists, self-confessed (if reluctant) outsiders like William James (Jones 156–157). Charles Addison lamented that all of these modern treatments of mysticism, including James's, were "tremendously interesting," but, alas, the discussions were "mainly academic" (Addison 3). They "tend rather to make more intelligent the criticism of Mysticism than to make more Mystics" (Addison 3).

Modern mysticism, as it was crafted from Vaughan and Frothingham to James and Jones, was a religious construct primarily made by post-Protestant seekers for post-Protestant seekers, for those who longed to be first-hand prophets but who mostly remained second-hand observers. "There are 'seekers' today in all lands," Rufus Jones noted, "who are keen and eager for fresh truth and new light on mysticism" (Jones 1931: x). It was a small step from all these seekers of mysticism at the turn of the twentieth century to all those questers after spirituality a century later. When Thomas Kelly, an academic philosopher turned Quaker devotionalist, remarked in 1940 that "we are all seekers," he was not so much an oracle prescient of the Baby-Boomer generation (Kelly 117). Instead, he looked back across a century of liberal Protestant writers on mysticism who pointed the way to a culture ever desirous of an elusive spirituality. Scholarship, religious seeking, and modern disenchantments long intertwined. Whether that mixture of knowledge and desire makes illegitimate the learning of religious liberals or even the very birth of Religious Studies as a discipline is not a particularly fruitful historical question. However present the past may be, history begins with acknowledgment of the pastness of the past, with difference, and that holds true whether the naturalism of Coventry or the nostalgia of James is in view.

Notes

1   This essay is modestly revised for this volume from two previous incarnations, one in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (June 2003): 273–302 and the other from his book *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 2nd edn. (University of California Press, 2012).

2   My account focuses on the term's history within the study of religion, less on the term's genealogy as part of a history of Christian theology and exegesis. The latter history is taken up notably in Bouyer (42–55) and McGinn (xiv–xviii, 265–291). Where McGinn widens his historiographical lens beyond Christian theology to philosophical, psychological, and comparativist approaches, he largely reproduces the gap found elsewhere. He rightly critiques de Certeau's specific genealogy as far too narrow and then concentrates on the flowering of studies from James forward.

3   James did not name names in his sharp dismissal of "this re-interpretation of religion as perverted sexuality" at the outset of the *Varieties* (11n.). He had many opponents on this point among psychologists, alienists, and sexologists – not least Havelock Ellis who

exercised a formative influence on erotic theorizing. Among eighteenth-century writers Ellis looked to Swift, not Coventry, for inspiration, another example of Coventry's displacement, even among those who would have had considerable appreciation for his views (Ellis 1: 312–313).

4   Vaughan's book was widely esteemed, but it also had its severe critics, including Catholic writers who found Vaughan's "mysticism" a terrible trivialization of "mystical theology." It was little more, in this view, than a shallow series of conversations "over port wine and walnuts," with the occasional "flirtation" thrown in (Dalgairns 7).

5   These body-spirit valuations, while common, were subsequently challenged and widely reversed, especially through the impact of such twentieth-century French thinkers as Lacan, Bataille, and Irigaray on feminist philosophy (Hollywood). Indeed, the very absence of the body in the liberal Protestant construction of mysticism invited its own inversion as the body has become evermore present in the study of mysticism over the last three decades, building, in particular, off the formative work of Caroline Walker Bynum.

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CHAPTER 31

"We Kiss Our Dearest Redeemer through Inward Prayer"

Mystical Traditions in Pietism

Ruth Albrecht[1]

The Pietist Reformers of the late seventeenth century sought to continue the Reformation and to bring to life the doctrines renewed in the sixteenth century. Pietism was also tied in with the Reformation heritage in its reception of mysticism, although it went further on decisive points. The beginning of Pietism is usually dated to the 1670s, although for some time now it has been debated whether Johann Arndt (1555–1621) should be identified as the real catalyst. If so, the beginning of this church reform movement would lie in the early seventeenth century. In any case, what is beyond dispute is that there were, as much in the Lutheran as in the Reformed church, diverging currents where the search for an authentic praxis of Christian life was articulated. The Pietism manifest in Germany certainly needs to be classified in the history of early modern, trans-confessional, European trends regarding piety.

For Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), the most important German scholar of Pietism in the nineteenth century, Pietism as a whole turned out to be a mistaken adoption of mysticism into the fabric of the Reformation churches and, therefore, a reversion to Catholic piety. Ritschl saw Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) as the "master key for Pietism," and he held that through the renewed connection to him Protestantism had been distorted as if by "a smuggled commodity" (Ritschl 340–341). For a long time, this interpretation shaped Protestant church historiography on the matter of mysticism and Pietism. The liberal church historian Karl von Hase (1800–1890), on the basis of one of his early sermons from the 1820s, faced a similar verdict. One of "the quiet people"[2] had recommended him to preach on at least one occasion. Afterwards, Hase was taken for a mystic. Looking back, he explained, "at that time, that was what we called those whom we now call believers; indeed it was then a lower reference" (Hase 113). Such negative judgment of the mystical tradition was also reflected in the fact that often – without real, detailed evidence – radical Pietism and mysticism were closely associated with each other. Since then, this image has changed in favor of the

perception of there being a multitude of combinations between mystical tradition and Pietist profile. In light of this altered view, just how mysticism has contributed essential lines to the very shape of Pietism can be more clearly seen.

While it is evident that several Pietist protagonists, to a significant extent, did occupy themselves with mystical themes and texts or could themselves even be identified as mystics, the question remains open whether the internalized, Pietist religious culture, with its hymns and its prayer literature, might be labeled mystical. This applies to the Pietist visionaries as well, among whom women were especially prominent. Whereas for some visionaries mystical tendencies were overt, others might be better classified as prophets with mystical impetus.

The quotation in the title of this chapter comes from a collection of texts published in 1705 (*Consilia* 765). One of the most prominent Pietists of the time, Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), and his somewhat lesser known mother-in-law, Susanna Margarethe Sprögel (1656–1730),[3] collaborated in publishing this material. Several mystical elements that were widespread in Pietism emerge here: inner prayer, an affective Christ-centered piety, as well as the erotic language of the Song of Songs. This particular quotation comes from a letter – a medium of the culture of friendship that is characteristic of the Pietist movement. For Pietist networks (and others), mystical language was conducive to edifying one another by means of the so-called "Language of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:18); it also served as assurance that group membership was partially closed towards the outside. The addressee of the letter is not known; that the author in all probability was female underscores women's participation in the reform movement.

Reform Impulses in the Seventeenth Century

Johann Arndt, Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) and the very different people who can most easily be subsumed under the category "Spiritualists" indicate the spectrum of the protest against the prevailing theology and the rigid church structures of the post-Reformation era. Despite the diversity of their ideas, they shared in common some degree of involvement in mysticism. The return to the mystical tradition helped them establish criteria for finding solutions for a church that was perceived as crisis-laden. Admittedly, the orientation towards mystics and mystical theology embraced markedly different forms: while some of these reformers merely borrowed in a limited way from the mystical tradition, others developed into independent mystical thinkers and mystics grounded in the Reformation. Within these same circles, a similarly broad scope can be documented relating to other areas of life. While some held a ministry their entire life, others lost their curacy and trekked for years through several European countries. Along with theologians, lawyers and craftspeople also ranked among the reformers and spiritualists; female representatives included Anna Ovena Hoyers (1584–1655), Eva Margaretha Frölich (c. 1650–1692) and Anna Vetter (geb. 1630).

The critical stance of the Spiritualists sometimes led to an openly articulated break with all church and social structures, but it also sometimes found expression in an ascetic seclusion unmarked by polemics. An ethics of imitation, a mysticism of suffering, an inward Christ-centered piety, and eschatological expectations all arose in

complex combinations, whereby these elements could blend with further adaptations such as political prophecy or a Paracelsian[4] philosophy of nature. Many of these "pious critical outsiders" (Brecht 236) deserve further thorough study, so that their influence on Pietism can be more clearly determined.

Indisputably, the deep roots of mysticism in the Lutheran church and Lutheran theology go back to Johann Arndt, life-time Lutheran minister who had an enormous effect on Pietism. Arndt's influence unfolded mainly through the four volumes of his *Von wahrem Christenthumb* (*True Christianity*), published between 1605–1610 and later expanded to six volumes, and his *Paradiesgärtlein* (*Little Garden of Paradise*) of 1612. These devotional books – which included reproductions of texts by Angela von Foligno (see Chapter 25, this volume) and Valentin Weigel – called for prayer, repentance, and sanctification, the goal being union with God. In addition to these, Arndt also edited classical works of the mystics, such as *Deutsche Theologie* (*German Theology*), Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, and writings of Johannes Tauler (see Chapter 23, this volume). Arndt incorporated tenets of the mystics – e.g., progressive stages toward mystical union, and regeneration as only one step on the way toward the indwelling of Christ in the person – into his Lutheran theology.

In contrast, Jabob Böhme, a shoemaker, was inspired by a mystical experience, which he expanded into a system of his own, drawing on ideas borrowed from nature-mysticism and alchemy. According to Böhme, the person in need of redemption through Christ is embedded in the all-embracing structure of thinking that seeks to explain both the genesis and the telos of the cosmos. Due to their origin as an androgynous being, all humans strive spiritually for the union of man and woman. The divine Wisdom plays a central role in this scenario, from the beginnings of creation until the end time. It seeks an encounter with individuals, in order to merge with each person into a relationship of love, thus reshaping her or him into a new being modeled after the original androgyn, Adam. In addition, Böhme authored uplifting treatises that served as guides in a concrete practice of mystical piety and prayer.

Terms such as "spiritualists," "mystical spiritualists," "Baroque spiritualists," or "enthusiasts" reflect attempts to identify all those who – whether by referring to Arndt and Böhme or alluding further afield – spoke out with criticism and with calls for reform. They shared in common the demand that they be able to contribute something to the shape of theology and the church, but without feeling bound to the normative function of Bible, confession or church structure. By their own account, their messages depended on immediate divine action, which manifested itself either through the Holy Spirit or Christ, or by means of visions and other revelational phenomena.

In what follows, I can only briefly mention a few of these "spiritualists" who were of great significance for Pietism. Although those designated as "mystical spiritualists" were in contact with one another to some degree, in contrast to Pietism they initiated no movement toward social renewal; rather, their primary influence was through the texts they wrote. Many Pietists, male and female, viewed the Spiritualists' widespread practice of combining, on the one hand, severe criticism of church and theology with, on the other hand, recommendations for an internal, individual encounter with God as a model for the unfolding of their own objective. Particular forms of speech and chains of argumentation re-emerge in Pietist texts; even more importantly, entire books

by the Spiritualists became exemplars for works of Pietist provenance. Joachim Betke (1601–1669), Christian Hoburg (1607–1675) and Friedrich Breckling (1629–1711) ranked among the most influential Spiritualists. In this connection, the writings of Valentin Weigel (1533–1588) were also influential. In some respects, Johann Georg Gichtel (1638–1710), a German who spent most of his life in The Netherlands and was influential especially in England and Germany, can also be counted among the Spiritualists. His special significance lay in his spreading of the writing of Jakob Böhme and in the further development of the Sophia speculation he inspired.[5]

Mysticism-Reception as a Formative Element for the Beginning of Pietism

The underlying definition of Pietism is based on the view that the reform movement took on its defining contours in the years between 1670 and 1680, so that from that point forward a new approach, distinguishable from similar impulses, can be identified. One characteristic feature of this new movement was its discussion groups, the so-called *collegia pietatis*, out of which Bible study meetings would later emerge. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705), the leading Lutheran theologian of early Pietism, arranged for a new edition of Arndt's works and recommended that theology students read in particular *Deutsche Theologie* and Tauler's works, since they were so important to Luther, and also *The Imitation of Christ*. These recommendations, along with the admonition for self-renunciation as a basic beginning point for Christianity, are found in his *Pia Desideria* of 1675, the most important text of early Pietism. Overall, however, he remained reticent about the reception of mystical ideas and forms of speech.

For Johann Jakob Schütz (1640–1690), however, a Frankfurt lawyer, the encounter with mysticism was powerful and significant. In the imperial city Frankfurt-am-Main, these two men transformed the recognized forms of intellectual culture of conversation, until now under the signature of Baroque society and of academic discourse, into pathways of a Christian-connoted exchange among the like-minded. This proved to be the essential catalyst of the Protestant reform movement in Germany.

At the end of the 1680s, Schütz experienced a conversion precipitated by reading Tauler. His encounter with Tauler simultaneously involved a turn to the Bible. "He found a new way, one that arises out of the sacred scriptures but leads, not to doctrinal propositions or to the intellect, but rather to the subject and its experience and action. From Tauler's pointing to the inner person, he began to correlate the Bible with the voice of conscience, with the movements of the soul" (Deppermann 61). An edition of Hoburg's that included the pseudo-Taulerian writings very likely reinforced for Schütz the high valuation of personal experience as hermeneutical key. He thus inspired the Tauler edition, published in Frankfurt in 1681, which included a Preface by Spener along with further standard works such as *Deutsche Theologie* and *The Imitation of Christ*. In addition to this, the lawyer acquired an extensive knowledge of the mystical tradition. In two works, the *Christliches Gedenkbüchlein* (1675) and *Christliche Lebensregeln* (1677), the lines of thought that Schütz had pursued since his life-turn, bound up as it was with Tauler, became more clearly expressed. The organizing principle of the *Gedenk-*

büchlein is a tripartite division based on the three stages of mystical progression: puri-fication, illumination, and union. The precise ways in which he explained these stages, however, were not directly connected to Tauler but ought instead to be traced through Hoburg and other representatives of the Pseudo-Taulerian tradition. The *Lebensregeln* shows how Schütz's "characteristic Biblicism comes into its own programatically" (Deppermann 175). This work, which was conceived as a compendium of practical ethics, consists of verses from the New Testament ordered in the style of a catalogue of virtues. In his Epilogue, the author applies a three-way scheme in which he contrasts three "stages" of "Divine blissfulness" (*Gottseeligkeit*) to three stages of "Divine oblivi-ion" (*Gottvergessenheit*) (Schütz 787–795). The description of those who have achieved the "highest degree of perfection in this life" suggests that Schütz had come into touch with Sophia-Mysticism:

> And what the divine Wisdom reveals from inexpressible treasures of glory and knowledge to its select friends/With what incomprehensible sweetness does the Most Benevolent embrace his bride in his mother's womb/Of that it is proper for me neither to speak/nor to write. (790)

August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), founder of the influential center in Halle an der Saale for the world-wide dissemination of Pietism, translated two writings of the Spanish mystic Miguel de Molinos (c. 1628–1696) from Italian into Latin in 1687. As a result, the *Guida spiritual* and *Della communion cottidiana* became accessible to German academic discourse. The impulse to be engaged with an author from the seventeenth-century renaissance of Catholic mysticism was not coincidental, since from the begin-ning Francke's theological development was marked by the influence of Johann Arndt. His adversaries took Francke's study of Molinosas as propaganda for Catholic Quietism. His openness to the mystical tradition and to the living, ongoing effects of divine revelation to human beings in the form of mystical gifts can be gleaned by the fact that, at the beginning of the 1690s, he had received Pietist visionary women at Halle and con-ducted an intensive correspondence with them. In his later publications Francke dis-tanced himself from all ecstatic phenomena and clothed his remaining sympathy for mysticism in formulas that underscore the supremacy of the divine Word over all other possible ways of knowing God.

Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714)

The Pietist theologian Gottfried Arnold gained his great prominence not so much as a mystic but as church historian. His most important work was *Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* (*A History of the Church and Heresy*, 1699–1700), in which he argued that church his-tory can only be written if the so-called heretics are included as part of the church. Nevertheless, it was he who contributed the most to the reception of the mystical tradi-tion in Pietism, in several ways: a systematic overview of the history and theology of mysticism as well as numerous editions go back to him; from the start he had taken mystical themes into account; and, last but not least, some of his passages on Sophia-mysticism suggest that he himself had had mystical experiences.

Arnold's interest in mystical themes had many different sources. Although he first came into contact with reform efforts through Philipp Jakob Spener, he turned relatively quickly to more radical representatives of reform, and he himself became one of the most important exponents of this end of the Pietist spectrum. In 1696, he wrote his first draft on the history of the church, *Die Erste Liebe* (*The First Love*), which depicted the Christian community of the first three centuries as the ideal; he held that ideal up as a mirror so as to critique the church of the seventeenth century. Discernible here are specific mystical themes such as enlightenment or union with God, but the most important basis for his turn toward mysticism lies in the criterion of inwardness, which became for him the standard for judging the state of the church. He attached only a subordinate significance to Holy Scripture as medium of revelation. In 1696 Arnold also published a first translation of mystical sources, such as the homilies of the ancient church ascetic, Macarius. The avoidance of all externals in favor of the inner immersion in prayer, which Marcarius had urged, corresponded to Arnold's ideal of the Christian life. At the same time, in Quedlinburg he himself aspired to an ascetic solitary life, which was embedded in the network of Pietists. His first edition was followed by numerous other editions and reprints, which expanded the basis for the pietistic reception of mysticism considerably.

Immediately after the publication of his radical positioning for an ascetic and erotically-charged Sophia-worship, Arnold married – a step that, in the eyes of his disciples, had been prompted by divine Wisdom. His wife, Anna Maria Sprögel, was the daughter of Susanna Margaretha Sprögel, the Pietist author mentioned above. His biography claims that, through his wife, "the Wisdom of God [showed] him much grace and beneficence" [*Gnade und Gutthaten*] (Lebens = Beschreibung 9).[6] Although after 1700 Arnold attenuated his criticisms of the church, some of which stemmed from mysticism, he held fast to his program his entire life, advocating that mystical doctrine be anchored in the church of the Reformation. The most ambitious book in this regard was his *Historie und Beschreibung der mystischen Theologie* (*History and Description of Mystical Theology*), published simultaneously in 1703 in German and Latin. There he not only laid out a chronologically arranged compendium of all the mystics known to him as well as anonymous texts, but he also developed his own understanding of mysticism. Unlike a few years earlier, he conceded that there are misunderstood formulations in this tradition. Referring to Luther and Arndt, he went to even greater lengths than before to establish a basis for understanding the integration of mysticism and reformation theology.

Sophia-Mysticism

It was primarily the English visionary Jane Leade (1623–1704) and Johann Georg Gichtel who passed on the ideas of Jakob Böhme – especially the idea that the divine *Sophia* addresses persons directly – to German Pietism. Gichtel disseminated his ideas to numerous Pietists by means of an extensive correspondence, including with Gottfried Arnold. He maintained that only celibate men and women could enter into a mystical marriage with *Sophia*. In his letters and treatises, he described his own inten-

sive experiences with divine Wisdom and called on those correspondence partners whom he considered worthy to strive towards the encounter with *Sophia*. His own encounters he captured with highly erotic metaphors. *Sophia*, although described mostly as a female figure, is also depicted as a Jesus form of revelation, so that often the talk is about Jesus-Sophia.

For Arnold as for Gichtel, the point of departure lies in the particular experience of the divine Wisdom. Most space in Arnold's *Geheimniß Der Göttlichen Sophia* (*Secret of the Divine Sophia*) (1700), however, is devoted to the verification that, in the Bible and also in the writings of the church fathers, Wisdom is witnessed as "virgin and child-bearer/mother and bride" (111). Arnold emphasized that only those who pursue this path can really understand the mystical fusion with *Sophia*. The androgyny of human creation as well as of Wisdom was an integral feature of Arnold's Sophiology. *Sophia*, whose "Spirit is just the same as the Spirit of Jesus," traces back to "the human soul in ancient paradisiacal innocence" (154–155). The most extensive part of Arnold's writing on Sophia consisted in songs and poems, many of which refer to the Song of Songs. The abundance of their erotic imagery recalls all facets of bridal mysticism:

> For with Sophia's downpour of love
> The earthly epidemic of lust changes
> Into dung and abomination; because in the enjoyment
> I incline from the visible
> To her inner intercourse
> Until the virginal-chastely sense
> Attains the most beautiful bride. (Arnold 79)[7]

Arnold also used the metaphor of divine impregnation: "Come love/impregnate me/ flow through the powers/And pour the divine juices sweetly into me" (93).

Among the German female Pietists there were no representatives of Sophia-Mysticism who, like Leade, developed her own system on these themes. It is not known how the Pietist women with whom Gichtel corresponded may have appropriated his ideas, since that part of the correspondence was not preserved. *Sophia* was, however, clearly present in the thinking of both Susanna Margaretha Sprögel and Anna Catharina Scharschmied,[8] even though it was not central to their reflections. In Sprögel's *Consilia*, the seeking and pleading soul receives many consoling answers, sometimes from Christ, her bridegroom, and sometimes from Wisdom who reveals herself as divine mother. Wisdom prepares the soul for union with the bridegroom:

> He is your all/I say your faithful mother; who has pulled you out of the dung of reason. I say to you/I want to do more work on you/and lead you to your bridegroom in the chamber. There you should have eternal, pure delight/and enjoy unceasingly. (*Consilia* 142)

The soul is addressed at the same time as virgin and as "queen and woman [*königin und männin*]." In some places Christ and *Sophia* seem to be thought of as identical, such as when the talk is about "Jesus-Sophia." Sprögel wrote in one of her letters, "The love

of Christ penetrates us all with the holy kiss of Jesus-Sophia!" (232, 796). In her 1703 *Einfältiges Zeugniß Von dem Wahren Dienste des Geistes im Neuen Bunde* (*Simple Testimonial of the True Service of the Spirit in the New Covenant*), Scharschmied introduced Wisdom as the feminine part of the first human being, thereby echoing the ideas of Böhme, Gichtel, and Arnold. Consequently, for her what was needed is a return to the origin: Christ as the new Adam, together with Wisdom, once again takes possession of true believers.

Female Visionaries and Authors

From the beginning, Pietism was characterized by the noticeable presence of women. They participated in many different roles in the formation and expansion of the movement. Diverse theological and social moments made activities that transcended traditional boundaries possible for women. Fitting the mystical profile were women of lower social strata, who were known as visionaries, as well as many theologically educated women, whose written texts contributed to the dissemination of mystical thought. These authors also exhibited mystical experiences of their own, even though this was not at the foreground of their writing. They distinguished themselves primarily not as mystics but as female authors with mystical impulses, while the female visionaries – usually illiterate – as a rule did not set their experiences in writing.

In the years 1690–1692, reports of extraordinary revelations surfaced in different areas, the most spectacular of which referred to the so-called "enthused maids" in Erfurt, Halberstadt, and Quedlinburg. These women, who were active as maids, mixed socially with the Pietist groups, lapsed into ecstasy and relayed their divine messages received in visions or in auditions. Drops of blood were observed on Anna Eva Jakobs, so she received the name the "Blutschwitzerin" ("the woman who sweats blood"). Although these women vanished from the scene after a short time, Rosamunde Juliane von der Asseburg and Adelheid Sybille Schwartz remained connected to Pietism for a longer period of time. They became well known and their message spread because of Pietist theologians such as Francke, Andreas Achilles (1656–1721), and Johann Wilhelm Petersen (1649–1727). Transitory ecstatic phenomena involving remarkable bodily movements cropped up in students at Halle as in noble women and craftspeople. Since the messages communicated by the visionary women had to do with very specific questions, they had no enduring significance, and as a result these women themselves had little impact on the overall image of Pietism. There were fierce theological debates about whether these signs were divine revelations or were delusions. Within Pietism itself no consensus was reached concerning this. Adversaries, of course, saw the visions and other phenomena as heretical errors.

Johanna Eleonora (von Merlau) Petersen (1644–1724) is arguably the most important of the female theological authors. Although earlier scholarship had viewed her as a student of Spener who then gradually became more radicalized theologically and ended up with mysticism, scholars now see her development quite differently: her engagement with mysticism was there at the very beginning of her path to becoming a distinguished representative of Pietism. To all appearances, Petersen's first book,

printed in 1689, reflected issues of interest in and around Frankfurt, where she lived from 1675 to 1680.[9] The *Gespräche des Hertzens mit Gott (Dialogue of the Heart With God)* probably picked up on a book title of Hoburg and owed its structure to his work. In formulating meditations with the aim of leading readers to prayer, Petersen also used the meditations of the Jesuit Hermann Hugo, who was influential for a number of authors, as a paradigm. The first version of her autobiography, which was included along with these meditations, reflected the striving for mystical self-renunciation, equanimity, and humility articulated by Schütz. According to Petersen's interpretation, suffering for Christ's sake belongs necessarily to a life in imitation of Christ. The goal is implied with 2 Peter 1: 4, in the idea of partaking in the divine nature (Petersen, *Leben* § 20).The autobiographer depicts herself as a model of passive equanimity in the face all provocations; when it came to important decisions, like the question of a marriage, she initiated nothing on her own but instead submitted entirely to the will of God. (§ 16–18, 26)

Petersen's *Die Nothwendigkeit Der Neuen Creatur In Christo* (*The Necessity of the New Creature in Christ*), a small treatise printed in 1699 that very likely originated in the Frankfurt years, provides clear evidence of how she, Schütz, and their circle drew from the mystical tradition. The model of imitation-ethics that this group advocated was based on the favoring of a solitary life, which thus implied maintaining a distance from worship services.

> There one goes from clarity to clarity/and all watching becomes not so sour/because one stands in the power of God/and has in practice emotion and motion of the heart/and is accustomed to remaining at home/or to retreating/also by diverse outward performances/ from which one should try to keep away/that one does not scatter thereby/and be drawn out of one's own fortress. (*Nothwendigkeit* 57)

The goal of faith described by the author – namely, becoming a new creature in Christ – requires self-renuniciation and the indwelling of Christ in the heart. The training that leads to imitation occurs by way of the movement from experiencing "Christ before us/outside of us" to experiencing "Christ within us" (24, cf. 36). With other figures of speech that probably derived from the thought of Böhme and Gichtel, Petersen described this experience as having "the essence of the holy anointing" (33). Whoever suffers the hiddenness of God and rejection by fellow human beings and interprets these as divine tests is counted among the friends of Christ (19, 50). The Pietist profile of this text and its author is signaled in the fact that it nonetheless involves a taking action – that is to say, it promulgates this belief "with deed and in effect" (28).

Although Petersen at times stood in close contact with some representatives of Sophia mysticism, this orientation had only marginal significance in her work. She has been regarded as a mystic partly because of her visionary experiences. Yet, although she did indeed disclose these in her writing, she also set limits to their value. In a dismissal of Jane Leade, she complained that the revelations granted to her in this form of experience served only to get her to become preoccupied with Holy Scripture and to seek therein the truth of God. Certainly her scripture reading distinguished itself through an enthused hermeneutic, so that the views she declared to be biblical were

accepted only by some Pietists. Millenarianism and apocalypticism were the result for her of experiences of revelation, intensive prayer and reading of the Bible, on which she placed the main emphasis.

Sprögel's *Consilia und Responsa Theologica* presented a mixture of diverse genres and streams of mystical traditions. In all probability, the form that characterized the Pietist scene in Quedlinburg around 1700 (to which Arnold and some of the enthused maids also belonged) is here reflected. Alongside aspects of Sophia and bridal mysticism are to be found some dreams and visionary experiences. Through these means it became clear to her that the new human being must be born in her; in that way, at the same time, the birth of Christ takes place interiorly, in the person. Wisdom prompts the already practiced soul to establish a certain distance over against those who do not have at their disposal the same potential for experience. Like-minded people should mutually encourage one another:

> If you have then found this speaking word and font of love/then preserve it/and only eat and drink everything from that/communicate also much about it to other thirsty souls. (290)

Such a tendency toward withdrawal is also reflected in the way the Pietists of Quedlinburg lived. Scharschmied's three books use the mystical themes tangible in this city. In 1704 she pulled out a selection from the *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, though without any introduction or commentary. Her contribution consists of combining every saying by Angelus Silesius with a biblical verse. It can only be assumed that the Arnold Silesius edition of 1701 provided the impetus for this author's work.

Blood- and Wound-Mysticism

The distinctive Christ-centered religiosity of Pietism coalesced for the Moravians – in an almost playful method of naming – with aspects of the theology of the cross. In the Moravian community there emerged a distinctive cult of the blood and the wounds of Christ that was unique in Pietism. Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), who was deeply influenced by Pietism but who, in contrast to Francke and Halle, did not understand himself as a Pietist, promoted this Christ-mysticism in a crucial way – a mysticism which viewed this as present in all matters of living, including even intimate conjugal relations. The intense preoccupation especially with the pleura (the side-wound of Christ) had its source no so much in a participation in Christ's passion and death on the cross as in the discovery of the joy and grace given through belief in Christ. The pleura became for Zinzendorf and the Moravian Brethren a symbol of the immersion into the salubrious wounds of Christ. One of the "Litany of the Wounds" (*Wundenlitanei*) authored by Zinzendorf served as the basis for a series of sermons. And, although certain excesses of the so-called "sifting-time" (1743–1750) would later be revoked, the affective relation to Christ remained – and Christ's blood and wounds also remained a distinguishing mark of the Moravians.

The blood- and wound-mysticism found its most distinctive expression in the hymns of the Moravians. The *Herrnhuter Gesangbuch*,[10] first published in 1735, contained numerous texts describing, with a flood of images, mystical immersion in the broken body of Christ. A hymn by Benigna Marie von Reuß-Ebersdorf (1695–1751) turns up in the category "Of Faith and the Sprinkling of Christ's Blood." The first verse goes,

> Thus my soul reposes in Jesus' blood and wounds,
> There goes and blows a gentle breeze of love:
> I am bound to him in mind and heart;
> Because I find before me there pure comeliness.
> That is why I gladly care to sit in the furrows of his wounds,
> My soul to graze:
> There I am silent even if lightening blazes,
> And I rest gently in this hole of love. (HG 248, no. 260)

In 1748 Zinzendorf composed a hymn for two choruses, which sing to each other their play on words. The first chorus of the *Te Pleuram* invites the heart, to go deeply "into the little side"; the soul feels itself "quivering" (*zitterlich*). The second chorus of *Te Pleuram* answers with the continuation: "shook by love-fever" (*schütterlich*). The chorus addresses the side-wound directly: "Thus do you yet remain, O little Side"; the second chorus continues: "the center point of the little heart." Christ's wound is regarded as the "mother-city" of believers, in which "God Mother" gives birth to the soul (2249, no. 2348). Different from the encounter with Sophia, which takes place in the individual and can be spoken of in a meaningful way only among insiders, the cult of blood and wounds extended to the Moravians collectively, who are classified as "blood-community" (1361, no. 1495). The challenge of the fellowship of the community rests in "preaching conscientiously the bleeding wounds" (1363), thereby converting as many as possible to Christianity. The individual contemplating Christ and the Moravian community share specific experiences:

> My heart burns, I feel it;
> I am the Lamb's speck of dust,
> in the gap of the side-stab,
> there I sit as a little dove.

In another strophe of this hymn by Johannes von Wattewille (1718–1788) it says, "and if brothers and sisters come, then come they having swum in the sea of grace of the blood" (1763, no. 1849). The "flood of blood," which until this point had covered only the Moravian community, will extend – so the poet hoped – over all lands (1763, no. 1849).

An oft quoted strophe of the *Herrnhuter Gesangbuch* (1858, no. 1945) consists almost entirely of the word "wounds." Clauses such as "the wounds-wounds-wounds-flood [*fluth*]" gives"wounds-wounds-wounds-courage [*muth*]"are interrupted for forms of direct speech, such as "You wounds!" This verse fades with five lines of identical exclamations, "Wounds! Wounds!", then concluding with, "Oh, you wounds!" Such a

constricted theology, which focused so narrowly on the wounds, filled even well meaning contemporaries with incomprehension, and it raised the hackles of the critics of the Moravians, since the theological basis – namely, the salvific meaning of the suffering of Christ on the cross – was no longer communicated. Along with Sophia mysticism, the Moravian peculiarity of the cult of the wounds is deemed the form of Pietist mysticism that found its expression above all in lyrics. Both lines picture the union with the body of Christ or with the divine Wisdom making use of erotic forms of speech from the tradition of the Song of Songs and bridal mysticism.

The Bible of Berleburg

Pietist efforts of renewal directed at the practice of piety were also reflected in further Bible translations and editions. Whereas the Bibles printed in Halle were based on Luther's text and distinguished themselves above all through their small formatting and low prices, the undertaking centered in the small town of Berleburg attempted to establish mystical categories in the reading of the Bible. The eight-volume work, begun in 1726 and completed in 1742, offered next to its own translation both historical explanation and interpretations drawn from the mystical tradition. The Preface refers to the French mystic Madame Guyon (see Chapter 29, this volume). Her commentary work on the Old and New Testaments constitutes the most important reference point of those commentators belonging to the radical streams of Pietism. The Piestists regarded Guyon as like-minded, given that she – albeit from a Catholic position – taught an immersion into prayer that was unauthorized by the mediation of the clergy or the institutional church. The experience of self-renunciation that she described as central presented a common basis for the Protestant reformers. Her life story, filled as it was with suffering, made her a witness of the corporate way in imitation of Christ. Her explanations of the Old and New Testaments accommodated the Pietist concentration on the Bible as orientation for daily life. Furthermore, the fact that she was a woman also constituted, in the eyes of the Pietists, a further seal of approval for the present revelation of God beyond all constraints of the boundaries of confessions and gender. In the Preface to the Berleburg Bible yet more women were named as sources of inspiration for a mystical approach to the Bible: Jane Leade, Antoinette Bourignon, and Johanna Eleonora Petersen.

Biographical Collections

Pietist collections of the lives of the exemplary devout provide yet another palpable expression of the consciousness of the close connection between mysticism and Pietism. The seven-volume work *Historie Der Wiedergebohrnen* (*History of the Regenerate*), which began to appear in 1698, was originally oriented in relation to a collection of Puritan biographies, which it adopted. While the main focus in almost all of the volumes was primarily on Pietist men and women who had recently died, from the second volume the focus expanded to include mystics or, more precisely, those persons who stood for an opening of the Reformation tradition to mysticism. In this panorama, exemplary

lives – those, for instance, of Arndt, Böhme, Gichtel, Hoburg, Tauler, and Thomas à Kempis – are integrated into an ecumenically conceived history of the Pietist tradition. Significantly, the initiators of this first Pietist collection of biographies can be counted among the radical Pietists. Johann Henrich Reitz (1655–1720), after many difficulties in his parochial career due to his Pietist orientation, found in Berleburg a milieu that facilitated, ideally as well as financially, the publication of these books. The *History*, launched by Reitz, belongs to the most successful production of the literature of Pietism and inspired numerous further collections of biographies and autobiographies.

And if Arnold through his conception of church history (e.g., as is clearly the case in his *Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie*) attributed a much greater importance to individual Christians than to the institutional church – hence his interest in biographies – two writings in particular were due to Reitz's initiative. His collection *Vitae Patrum* (1700) included not only the early fathers of monasticism, but also ranged right up to the mystics of the sixteenth century, such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Johann von Staupitz. *Das Leben der Gläubigen* (*The Life of the Faithful*), printed in 1701, traced the formation of this tradition right up to his time.

Lines of continuity of this genre can be found in the work of Gerhard Tersteegen (1697–1769), poet, author of devotional works, spiritual leader,and a representative of Reformed Pietism. In his *Auserlesene Lebensbeschreibungen Heiliger Seelen* (*Selected Biographies of Holy Souls*), he assimilated several women and men of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries above all with medieval saints such as Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, and Julian of Norwich (women making up the majority of persons represented). In contrast to the editor of the Berleburg collection and to Arnold, Tersteegen explicitly singled out Catholics whom he saw handing down Quietism.

Eighteenth-Century Trends

Although Pietism had taken up permanent residence in a few areas around the middle of the eighteenth century, it lost its overall public prominence. In several districts and groups, however, the Pietist reform impulses settled, albeit in altered forms, continually renewing its shape. Tersteegen himself represented a mystical development of Pietism that found its expression primarily in edifying literature. Tersteegen's *Geistliches Blumengärtlein*, as well as his hymns and letters, examined mystical intimacy and took up the important elements of the medieval and the Pietist tradition, but they did so without any note of criticism of the church. The style of piety exemplified and propagated by Tersteegen rests on a withdrawal, so that one may experience the presence of God and the nearness of Christ as bridegroom. The ripple effects of Tersteegen's writings can be followed well into the twentieth century. At the same time, the very person of Tersteegen highlights how the Pietist impulse continued to have effect even after the excesses of the highpoint of its power of attraction, and it also underscores Pietism's openness to the heritage of mysticism. That Tersteegen belonged to the Reformed church highlights most clearly the extent to which confessional boundaries could be overcome through Pietism. After all, in the eighteenth century it was unusual, to say the least, for a member of the Reformed Church to hold up Roman Catholic saints as examples.

Tersteegen emphasized many times that it is exclusively about the interior life and not at all a sanctioning of the veneration of saints.

Although the Communities of True Inspiration (*die Gemeinden der Inspirierten*), which originated as a prophetic-ecstatic mass movement in the Reformed regions of the Cévennes in south-central France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, were long regarded as extreme marginal groups on the Pietist spectrum, scholars today consider them as a current within Pietism. Indeed, the Inspirationalists live on in the Amana Church Society in Iowa. The Reformed who had been expelled from France surfaced in England, the Netherlands, and Germany, among other places. The visionaries and ecstatics who, along with the Pietists, had been displaced found commonalities in these new lands. In some German territories, especially, new communities emerged. Eberhard Ludwig Gruber (1665–1728), Johann Friedrich Rock (1678–1749), and Ursula Meyer (1682–1743) rank among the prophetic leading figures of the German congregations. In contrast to most Pietist groups, in which visionary and ecstatic events happened only momentarily and even then their significance as divine revelation remained a matter of dispute, the so-called "utterances" (*Aussprachen*) connected with bodily tremors formed a constitutive element of the Inspirationalists. The leaders of the congregations were characterized by the claim that they had received messages directly from God, which they regularly passed on to members of the congregation. The "utterances" were prepared for through prayers and collective meditation, sometimes they occurred also suddenly. "In the congregations of inspiration, the utterances, as speeches inspired by the 'Spirit' and as direct revelations of God, approached a status almost coequal to the Biblical Word" (Noth 157).

The Meyer utterances, first published in 1781, present a selection of her communications promulgated in the state of inspiration. In part she passes the messages down in the first person singular, which had been bestowed on her directly either by God or by Christ. Her texts can be classified as apocalyptic literature of revelation, insofar as the expectation of the immediately imminent last days plays a central role. In the eschatological and prophetic utterances, elements of bridal mysticism blend with their classical terms. To mystical surrender belong giving up one's own will in order to come close to Christ. One such passage in *Himmlischer Abendschein* declares:

> Thus a soul that says it loves its Redeemer must bend its will completely under Him, even if this becomes sour to the soul, or if this leads to shedding bitter tears; nothing helps beforehand, whoever wants to enjoy the love of the bridegroom must bend and break its whole will whenever He wants to change whatever is displeasing him; a soul will have no rest if it does not bow unceasingly under His will of love. (Noth 246)

Conclusion

While elements such as Bible readings, apocalyptic hope such as millennialism, the vitalization of the laity through the recollection of the priesthood of all believers, and social structures such as the *collegia pietatis* rank among the characteristics of Pietism, these do not pertain to mysticism. A Pietist praxis of piety could exhibit certain affinities with mystical forms of immersion but could not have understood itself as taking up the

tradition of mysticism. As this essay has shown, the preoccupation with mystical texts on the part of some of the profiled protagonists of the Pietist movement did indeed work as a trigger for Pietism's new orientation. These impulses contributed to the reshaping of theology and piety under a Pietist signature, without always being distinguishable as such. A Pietist could not have classified him- or herself unconditionally as mystic; however, without the underlying roots of mysticism, Pietism would not have obtained its far-reaching importance with regard to theology and in the history of piety. Today, prejudices against radical Pietism and mysticism no longer hold, making it is easier to discern the harvest of the ancient and medieval strands of the tradition in the formation of the early modern Pietism. At the same time, it also becomes clearer just how much research is still needed in many areas so that the transmission of the mystical body of thought up to the eighteenth century, and how it was transformed in each epoch, can be properly understood.

Notes

1   Translated from the German by Julia A. Lamm. We are grateful to Claudia Tietz for her invaluable assistance in the translation process.
2   "*Die Stillenim Lande*" was a label for Pietist groups.
3   Arnold edited *Consilia und responsa theological* (1705); the author remains anonymous. Today the scholarly consensus is that the work can be ascribed to Sprögel.
4   This refers to Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541.
5   The newest study of Gichtel was generated at the Estonian University of Tartu, a brief summary of which exists in German. See Vösa.
6   This *Lebensbeschreibung* is a supplement to the fifth edition of the *First Love*, 1732.
7   The songs and poems under the title *Poetische Lob = und Liebes = Sprüche* are annexed to Arnold's *Sophia*, with a separate pagination.
8   Little is known about her biography; she was the wife of the jurist from Quedlinburg, Christian Friedrich Scharschmied (1658–1721).
9   In 1677, the Quaker William Penn visited the circle of friends around Petersen and Schütz.
10   The edition used here contains amendments and expansions from later years.

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CHAPTER 32

Nineteenth- to Twentieth-Century Russian Mysticism

Paul L. Gavrilyuk

Students of Russian Orthodox mysticism are confronted with a notable tension. On the one hand, it is commonly emphasized that Orthodox theology as a whole has a mystical character – a paradigm case being Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* – inasmuch as it is commonly believed to prioritize the experiential dimension of the knowledge of God over the rational dimension. On the other hand, "mystic" is not a descriptor that any of the spiritual masters in the Russian Orthodox tradition would have applied to themselves. Their Orthodox contemporaries, up to the late eighteenth century, would have been equally reluctant to use the term. Whereas in the Orthodox practice the term "mysteries" (Greek: *ta mysteria*; Russian: *tainstva*) applies to a broad range of sacramental practices and the expression "mystical supper" (Greek: *mystikos deipnos*; Church Slavonic: *tainaia vecheria*) refers to the Eucharist, the term "mysticism" is accepted only with many qualifications.

There are multiple reasons for the latter attitude: unlike the Christian west, Russian Orthodoxy did not have a well-established tradition of literary mystics, who left extensive autobiographical descriptions of their experiences; there is a tacit consensus in literature on spiritual direction that the accounts of mystical experiences are not for popular consumption, that such accounts could be potentially harmful to the spiritual lives of the uninitiated in monastic life; and Russian hagiographic literature, which up to the twentieth century maintained a largely premodern outlook, tends to focus on the miraculous acts and personal transformation effected by God's grace in the lives of the saints, monks, "startsy" (i.e. the elders who functioned as spiritual directors), holy fools, and so on, rather than on the descriptions of their interior states, or the content of their religious experiences. In addition, the term "mystic" was used with considerable reservations because it tended to connote, at least in part, someone whose experience tested the boundaries of the Orthodox tradition (somewhat similar to the western use of the term), rather than someone whose experience expressed the interior meaning and

the depth of the Orthodox faith. In the words of Vladimir Lossky, "mystical individualism has remained alien to the spirituality of the Eastern Church" (Lossky 21). Finally, the assumption that someone's interior life could be on display, so to speak, that it could become an object of scholarly study, and that, therefore, external methodological assumptions could be brought to bear upon it, is equally foreign to the spirit of eastern Orthodoxy. The Orthodox tradition stresses the ineffable, the incommunicable, and the transformative features of mystical experience.

Fortunately, the somewhat artificial question – which figures in the Russian Orthodox tradition could properly qualify as "mystics" – could be circumvented, since this volume focuses on different aspects of mystic*ism*, not on individual mystics. This means that the religious figures discussed in this chapter do not have to be strait-jacketed into a problematic term "mystic." Instead, I will first explore the mystical dimension of the tradition of spiritual direction, which developed in Russian monasticism. I will subsequently survey how select modern Russian religious thinkers – Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944), Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948), and Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) – engaged mysticism in their work. Finally, I will mention the Russian mystical sects, which flourished on the margins of or altogether outside of the Russian Orthodox church.

The Mystical Dimension of Russian Monastic Tradition

Orthodox Christianity came to the Kievan Rus' (a cradle of future Ukraine and Russia) from Byzantium in the ninth century. Byzantine Orthodoxy offered a highly sophisticated dogmatic theology, rich liturgical, architectural, and iconographic resources, as well as a flourishing monastic tradition. Not all elements of this tradition simultaneously took equally strong roots on the Slavic soil. For example, the enculturation of the Byzantine patterns of ascetic life had a greater impact on the ancient Russian church than the reception of dogmatic theology. Theologically, ancient Russia remained largely "silent" for the first six centuries, especially if one compares its theological output to that of the western Europe in the high Middle Ages (Florovsky). It could be said, however, that in terms of its religious development Russia was on an altogether different timeline. That is to say, the division of the history of Christianity into early, medieval, and modern periods has a somewhat limited application for the study of Russian mysticism.

Early Slavonic ecclesiastical literature shows greatest interest in translating early Christian and Byzantine ascetic writings, which served as informal manuals of spiritual direction. Russian spirituality, especially in its mystical dimension, for many centuries remained oral and was not concerned with codifying its practices in literary documents. In his pioneering work on Russian spirituality, a prominent Russian émigré historian George Fedotov notes: "In the Kievan period [ninth to thirteenth century], the most remarkable fact is the absence of a mystical tradition in the translated, as well as the original, Russian literature" (Fedotov xiii).

Fedotov discerns the first literary echoes of the mystical dimension of Russian Orthodox tradition in the *vita* of the fourteenth-century hermit, St. Sergius of Radonezh

(Russian: Sergii Radonezhskii). The *vita* depicts St. Sergius as a paragon of monastic virtues (such as humility, compassion, and mindfulness of God), reports his miracles of healing and resuscitation, and ascribes to him the spiritual gifts of prophecy, telepathy, and spiritual foresight. Early in his monastic career, St. Sergius was granted a vision of divine light and received a call to gather a monastic community and dedicate the church to the Trinity (Fedotov 73). On another occasion, the Virgin Mary, attended by the apostles Peter and John, appeared before the saint offering assurances that she would place his new monastery under her personal protection (81). Those assisting St. Sergius in the celebration of the liturgy observe the angels concelebrating with him (76–77) and, on a different occasion, the flame of the Holy Spirit entering the Eucharistic chalice (82). We should note that most, if not all, of the just mentioned features of St. Sergius's *vita* have precedence in patristic and Byzantine hagiography: the context for receiving such experiences is monastic and Eucharistic; the dominant imagery is that of fire and light; the Virgin Mary appears, as she often does in Byzantine hagiography, to offer protection. The overall impression is that the hagiographer (traditionally, Epiphanius the Wise) was operating entirely within the boundaries of what was acceptable in the Byzantine hagiographic tradition.

Perhaps the greatest spiritual gift that Byzantium bequeathed to Russia was Hesychasm (see Chapter 18, this volume). Hesychasm was a monastic movement, a theological teaching, and a practice associated with the recitation of the name of Jesus in prayer. The practice of Jesus Prayer was known in the Slavic lands since the time of the Kievan Rus. In the eleventh century, St. Theodosius of the Kievan Caves advised his disciples to recite the Jesus Prayer against temptations and demonic influences (Alfeyev 2002: 202). The hesychast practice became widespread in Russia towards the beginning of the fifteenth century.

One of St. Sergius's indirect monastic successors, St. Nilus of Sor[k]a (Russian: Nil Sorskii, c. 1433–1508) became the first literary systematizer and exponent of the hesychast practice in the ancient Russian context. St. Nilus was the leader of the Non-Possessors movement (Russian: *nestiazhateli*), which in its attitude towards wealth and monastic property paralleled similar poverty movements in the west, such as, for example, the Franciscans. As was common at the time, St. Nilus received his monastic training in Greece, where he fully interiorized the Hesychast method of prayer and the associated ascetic practices. In his *Monastic Rule* (Russian: *Ustav o zhitel'stve skitskom*), St. Nilus summarizes the core component of the Hesychast practice, the recitation of the Jesus Prayer, thus: "Let us constantly look into the depth of our heart, saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me" . . . Recite the prayer attentively in this manner, standing, sitting, or reclining. Enclose your mind in your heart, and moderating your respiration so as to draw breath as seldom as possible (as Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory of Sinai teach us), call upon God with fervent desire, in patient expectation, turning away all thoughts" (Fedotov 100). St. Nilus goes on to elaborate the associated Hesychast technique of controlling and modulating one's breath and of concentrating the mind prayerfully on the heart. The purpose of reciting the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" and variants, cf. Mark 10: 47, 48; Luke 18: 38) is to put the mind in the presence of God, to bring about the state of *hesychia*, i.e. of the watchful stillness of the spirit.

St. Nilus knew of the higher contemplative states that, according to the Byzantine Fathers, could be attained as a result of reciting the Jesus Prayer: "Of a sudden, the soul is infused with joy, and this incomparable feast paralyzes the tongue. The heart overflows with sweetness, and while this delight endures a man is drawn unwittingly from all sensible things. The entire body is pervaded with such joy as our natural speech is unable to describe; all that is earthly takes on the semblance of ashes and dung. When a man is conscious of this sweetness flooding his entire being, he thinks that this indeed is the kingdom of heaven and can be nothing else" (Fedotov 104). The saint gives little indication as to whether he experienced some of these states himself. St. Nilus follows the Byzantine tradition of stressing the ineffable, incommunicable, and transformative nature of such experiences. In Hesychasm, the vision of the uncreated light, the light with which Christ shone in the gospel accounts of his transfiguration (Mark 9: 2–10, and parallels), is the paradigmatic form of mystical experience. The content of visions, locutions, auditions, and other forms of religious experience must all be carefully examined. The ascetic tradition emphasizes the ever-present danger of demonic delusions and the extent to which passions may distort the contemplative's perception of the divine. Russian monastic literature is far more concerned with delineating the ways of guarding the heart from temptations and of purifying the mind of passionate thoughts than with dwelling on the content of religious experiences. Mastering the rules of the spiritual warfare was more important than charting the realm of mystical experience.

The practice of the Jesus Prayer in Russia is attested in the writings of Saints Dmitry of Rostov (1651–1709), Tikhon Zadonsky (1724–1783), Paisy Velichkovsky (1722–1794), Filarent of Moscow (1783–1867), Ignatius Brianchaninov (1807–1867), Theophanes Govorov (1815–1894), and John of Kronshtadt (Alfeyev 2002: 202–288; Bolshakoff 1976). A native of Poltava in Ukraine, Paisy Velichkovsky supervised a translation of the Church Slavonic edition of the *Philocalia* (Slavonic: *Dobrotoliubie*), a compendium of the works of Byzantine and earlier monastic teachers compiled by the Greek metropolitan Macarius of Corinth and St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite and published in Venice in 1782. The publication of this collection (Paisy's partial Church Slavonic edition in 1793; Theophan Govorov's first Russian edition in 1877) has greatly advanced the familiarity of the literate Russian Orthodox believers with the Byzantine ascetical theology and spirituality.

The Hesychast practice became even more popular in Russia through the publication of the anonymous memoir, commonly translated in English as *The Pilgrim's Tale* or *The Way of the Pilgrim* (Russian: *Otkrovennye rasskazy strannika*, 1881). The book tells a captivating story of an anonymous traveler, who seeks to understand the intention of the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5: 17: "pray without ceasing." Under the supervision of an elder, the pilgrim embarks on the recitation of the Jesus Prayer, beginning with the 3,000 and finishing with the 12,000 prayers a day. Towards the end of this exercise, which bears points of similarity to the Buddhist meditation, the traveler discovers that the prayer has acquired a life of its own, since his mind and his lips keep repeating the Jesus Prayer uncontrollably and "without ceasing." According to the anonymous author, the effects of the prayer include inner peace, tranquility, the overwhelming feeling of warmth and sweetness, the deepening of one's love for Jesus, and one's better comprehension of the Bible. *The Pilgrim's Tale* struck a deep chord not only

with its Russian readers, but also worldwide. It has become a classic not uncommonly included in the syllabuses of the college courses on Christian spirituality.

The Russian tradition also contributed to the ascetic theology of Hesychasm through the so-called Name Glorifiers controversy (*imiaslavie*). In the early twentieth century, a group of Russian monks from the St. Panteleimon's monastery on Mount Athos (Greece) began to teach that "the name of God is God himself." According to the leader of the Name Glorifiers, monk Antony (Bulatovich), this somewhat puzzling and bold formula was intended to convey a point that the name of Jesus, invoked in the Hesychast practice, becomes so suffused with the divine energies that it is capable of placing the person praying in the most unique and direct manner in God's presence. This claim was presented as an elaboration of the teaching of Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) regarding the relationship between the divine essence and the uncreated divine energies (in this case, the Divine Name of Jesus being treated as a form of the divine energy). The Russian church authorities interpreted the teaching of monk Antony and his followers as paramount to magic and idolatry. Consequently, the teaching of the Name Glorifiers was condemned as a heresy without a proper hearing. Shortly thereafter the movement was brutally suppressed: at the instigation of the Russian church authorities, a military ship was dispatched to the Mount Athos in 1913 in order to bring the Name Glorifiers back to Russia by force. Several monks died during the "siege" of the monastery by the state military forces, while the rest of the Name Glorifiers were dispersed throughout the Russian monasteries, in some cases having been defrocked. The violent suppression of the movement won the Name Glorifiers supporters among the Russian theologians, including Nicholas Berdyaev, Sergius Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky. There is presently a renewal of interest in the hesychast practice and in the theology of the Name Glorifiers both in Russia and abroad (Alfeyev 2002).

In addition to the Russian Hesychasm, two other forms of the Russian Orthodox ascetic ideal not uncommonly included a mystical dimension: the holy fools and the spiritual elders. There were Byzantine antecedents for both of these expressions of holiness. The holy fools (Greek: *salos*; Old Church Slavonic: *iurodivye*) were figures whose behavior was often outside of the boundaries of socially acceptable norms, at times verging on insanity. The holy fools often appeared in public scantily clad, or even naked (miraculously feeling warm even in the midst of a severe Russian winter!), with little regard for their outward appearance (Kovalevskii 170). They could publicly challenge the kings and had little regard for social distinctions. The *vitae* of St. Procopius, St. Theodore, and St. Basil describe them as possessing the gifts of healing, prophecy, clairvoyance, and distance vision (Kovalevskii 170, 205, 226–227). Their odd behavior was seen as a form of divinely sanctioned madness. The holy fools sometimes announced the future through enigmatic actions, rather than words. Such behavior has parallels in the Bible: for example, Isaiah was commanded to walk naked (Isaiah 20: 2–3); Hosea was ordered to marry a prostitute (Hosea 1: 2–9; 3: 1–3); and Ezekiel was told to perform other symbolic actions, prophesying the fate of Israel (Ezekekiel 4: 1–5: 4). It should be added that Byzantine and Russian holy folly was a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon, which attracted its share of imposters and madmen.

The second group, the elders (Russian: *startsy*) were most commonly monks who functioned as the spiritual directors. In the nineteenth century, the monastery of

Optino (Russian: *Optina pustyn'*) became an important pilgrimage center due to the presence of such startsy as Fr Leonid Nagolkin (1769–1841), Macarius Ivanov (1783–1860), and Ambrose Grenkov (1812–1891). Their major charismatic gift was discernment, a supernatural, God-given insight into the souls of those who came to them seeking spiritual advice. The interior lives of the elders themselves remain mostly unknown (an important exception is St. John of Kronshtadt's *My Life in Christ*). Lev Tolstoy's *Father Sergius* (1898) and the figure of the elder Zosima in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (1880) – are classic attempts at recovering this inaccessible world by means of literary imagination.

St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) was a nineteenth-century Russian ascetic and elder, to whom the pilgrims flocked from all parts of the country. According to his *vita*, Seraphim was called to monastic life by two visions of Mary, in the second of which the Mother of God, appearing in the company of the apostles Peter and John, pronounced him "one of our family" (Fedotov 248). Having spent some time in the monastery, St. Seraphim embarked on the solitary monastic life, soon distinguishing himself by the gift of healing.

One pilgrim who had been cured by the prayers of St. Seraphim, Nicholas Motovilov, wrote a memoir of his meeting with the saint. Motovilov's account is an important window unto the mystical side of the saint's life. St. Seraphim begins his conversation with Motovilov by perceiving without being told so explicitly that Motovilov's desire since childhood has been to discover the main purpose of the Christian life. When St. Seraphim declares that such a purpose lies in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, Motovilov presses him for more explanations. At this point, abandoning words, St. Seraphim demonstrates what he has in mind. Motovilov recounts: "After these words I looked in his face and there came over me an even greater reverential awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling brilliance of his midday rays, the face of the man who talks with you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone grasp your shoulders; yet you do not see the hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading several yards around and throwing a sparkling radiance across the snow blanket on the glade and into the snowflakes which besprinkled the great elder and me. Can one imagine the state in which I then found myself?" (Fedotov 274–275). Motovilov subsequently describes how the experience of Seraphim's standing in the light of transfiguration vividly affects all of his senses, filling him with peace, sweetness, joy, and delight. This type of mystical encounter belongs to the eastern Orthodox tradition of the light mysticism associated with St. Macarius of Egypt, St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Gregory Palamas, among others. As was mentioned earlier, the paradigm of this tradition is Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor in the presence of his disciples. The experience of transfiguration is the mystical foundation of the eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification.

Mysticism in Modern Russian Religious Thought

In the modern period educated Russia was subjected to a variety of western influences, including Freemasonry, Pietism, Romanticism, and philosophical Idealism. In

the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the works of the western mystics, including John Tauler, Johann Arndt, John Bunyan, and Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, were published in Russia under the direction of Johann Georg Schwarz (1751–1784) and Nikolai Novikov (1744–1818). The latter's publishing activities were suppressed during the last years of Catherine II's reign. The publication of western mystics continued in Russia under the patronage of Alexander I (reigned 1801–1825), when, thanks to the efforts of Alexander Labsin and prince Alexander Golitsyn, the works of Jung Stilling, Karl von Echartshausen, Jacob Boehme, Francis de Sales, Thomas à Kempis, and Madame Guyon were also translated and widely disseminated (Grass 104–106).

In the same century, the Idealist tradition found its most eminent proponent in Vladimir Solovyov. Solovyov was a poet, philosopher, literary critic, and mystic. In fact, he was the first Russian mystic to construct a philosophical system informed by his mystical experience. At a young age, Solovyov had had three encounters with a mysterious female figure, whom he identified as the divine Sophia, the Wisdom of God. The Sophia appeared to him for the first time when he was a child during the Sunday worship in the Orthodox church. Years later, when as a graduate student Solovyov pursued his study of Jewish mysticism and of ancient Christian Gnosticism at the British Museum, the Sophia started sending him written messages, using him as a medium for automatic writing. Soon thereafter she made her final and most memorable appearance before the young philosopher in the Egyptian desert. Solovyov later described his experiences with a touch of self-irony in a poetic memoir *The Three Encounters*. The Russian philosopher's mysticism was as complex as his speculative system. In *The Three Encounters* nature mysticism (also present in the poetry of his friend, Afanasy Fet [1820–1892] and in the folk philosophy of his distant relative, Grigory Skovoroda [1722–1794]), absorption mysticism, and a sense of mystical unity of the world, are cast in terms of a quasi-erotic encounter with the principle of the eternal feminine. On a different level, Solovyov's Sophia also functioned as a metaphysical principle of the divine humanity, which found its most complete expression in the eternal union of the divine and human natures in Christ.

Solovyov criticized the development of modern western European philosophy for its one-sided emphasis on "abstract principles" – rationalism, empiricism, positivism – to the exclusion of the mystical dimension of human experience. For Solovyov, mystical experience was not a peculiar form of religious experience that required an external justification by recourse to other forms of experience and defense from skepticism. On the contrary, mystical intuition into the unity underlying all being, what Solovyov called "all-unity," was the foundation of all knowledge and morality (Solovyov I: 588–560). Drawing on Schelling, Solovyov's developed the metaphysics of all-unity, which gave place not only to human reason and everyday experience, but also to mysticism and what he called "free theurgy" (Solovyov I: 742).

Solovyov had a profound impact upon the leaders of the Russian Religious Renaissance of the first third of the twentieth century. His poetry and philosophy was a major inspiration for a generation of thinkers that came after him, including such figures as poet Alexander Blok (1880–1921), philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, and theologians Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Sergius Bulgakov. In his book *The Philosophy of the Free Spirit*, Berdyaev emphasized the irreducible, metaphysics-defining character of

religious experience. Berdyaev drew heavily on the insights of the German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), especially his notion of *Ungrund*. The Russian philosopher interpreted *Ungrund* as the uncreated divine Freedom, which was ontologically prior to the God of Christian revelation. Berdyaev maintained that mystical intuition was the highest form of human knowledge, inasmuch as it involved an obliteration of the subject-object division, otherwise present in all other forms of knowledge. Berdyaev held that the content of mystical experience defied complete verbalization. Drawing on Florensky, Berdyaev emphasized the apophatic, symbolic, and antinomial (paradoxical) character of the central dogmas of the church, such as that of the Trinity and of the incarnation. For Berdyaev, the church dogmas expressed the deeper facts of mystical life (Berdyaev 59–63). Berdyaev maintained that the Christian mystics, both eastern and western, often tested the boundaries of the acceptable church teaching. Berdyaev considered himself a religious philosopher, rather than a theologian speaking on behalf of the Orthodox church.

Sergius Bulgakov developed Solovyov's philosophical vision of divine humanity with the depth and breadth unsurpassed by any other Russian theologian. Bulgakov, who in his teenage years had lost his faith and embraced Marxism, returned to the Orthodox church via philosophical idealism and theosophy. (In the 1900s Bulgakov published the theosophical works of Anna Schmidt, a school teacher from Nizhnii Novgorod, who imagined herself to be an incarnation of Solovyov's Sophia.)

In the *Unfading Light* (1918), Bulgakov reveals that his return to the church was punctuated by the three mystically colored encounters, reminiscent of Solovyov. In the first encounter he was suddenly overwhelmed by the strong sense of the presence of God, while passing through the Caucasian mountains; in the second encounter he met the beauty of the divine realm by contemplating the face of Rafael's Sistine Madonna; in the last encounter he had a profound experience of divine forgiveness upon his visit to a Russian starets (monastic elder). Mysticism permeated Bulgakov's mature theological speculations to such an extent that it would be difficult to separate the experiential and the speculative dimensions of his thought.

The reputation of the eastern Orthodox theology as "mystical" par excellence was established in the west by Vladimir Lossky's influential book *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (originally published in French as *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, Paris, 1944). In this work Lossky maintained that "The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church." (Lossky 8). In order to advance his thesis, Lossky chose to center his presentation of Orthodox theology around Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume). Lossky drew a line of connection between Pseudo-Dionysius's apophatic theology of divine darkness and the Hesychast spirituality. In the interests of apologetics, Lossky disregarded numerous historical instances when the representatives of doctrinal orthodoxy in fact clashed with those mystically inclined: consider, for example, the condemnation of the fourth-century Messalians, the persecution of St. Symeon the New Theologian by the Byzantines, the suppression of pietistic mysticism by Russian church officials in the nineteenth century, and the repressive measures undertaken against the Name Glorifiers.

Despite these serious historical blind spots, Lossky's idealized presentation of Orthodox tradition, which has allegedly achieved a full harmony between theology and mysticism, became a standard introduction to eastern Orthodoxy in the west for the post-War generation of Christian scholars and theologians. For example, *Russian Mystics* (revised English edition in 1977; originally published as *I Mistici Russi* in 1962), Sergius Bolshakoff endorses Lossky's thesis without any reservations, despite the fact that he had previously published *Russian Nonconformity* (1950) and was quite aware of the mystical inclinations of some Russian religious dissenters. Bolshakoff's *Russian Mystics* focused exclusively on the Russian Orthodox monasticism and was intended for a popular, rather than scholarly audience. Another example of Lossky's enduring influence is the work of metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, who in his Oxford dissertation, published under the title *St. Symeon, the New Theologian, and Orthodox Tradition* (2000), aimed at demonstrating "the mystical nature of tradition and the traditional nature of mysticism" (Alfeyev 2000: i).

The subject of "Russian mysticism" still awaits a definitive study of the ways in which mystical insights can both test the boundaries and express the deepest truths of the Orthodox tradition.

Mystical Currents outside of Russian Orthodoxy

Towards the end of the seventeenth century Russia became a home of many religious sects. The immediate cause of the rise of the sectarian movements was the schism within the Russian Orthodox church, which happened in the aftermath of the liturgical reforms of the patriarch Nikon (1605–1681). The group that broke away from the church became known as the Old Believers. The splinter group was headed by the archpriest Avvakum (1620–1681), who was a visionary and an apocalyptic prophet. Many Old Believers fled to the Russian North, where some surviving members of the sect continue to live to the present day. The Old Believers maintained that the official church was corrupted and that the world was coming to an end. In the atmosphere of heightened apocalyptic expectations and pressure from the state, the dwellers of several Siberian settlements of the Old Believers committed collective self-immolation, which the leaders of the sect interpreted as baptism by fire.

The Old Believers Schism compromised the unity of the Russian Orthodox church and provided a fertile ground for the emergence of other groups. The most prominent sects of mystical coloring included Khlysty and Skoptsy. The provenance of the derogatory title "Khlysty" is disputed. It is likely that the term is a corruption of the word *khristovtsy* ("Christ's people"), which was one of the sect's self-designations. The term "khlyst" also means a "thin rod" in Russian, possibly an allusion to the practice of (self-)flagellation with sticks and rods, reportedly practiced by some members of the sect during their prayer meetings. In addition to *khristovtsy*, the preferred self-designations include "God's People" (Russian: *liudi bozh'i*), "followers of Christ's faith" (Russian: *khristovovery*), and "White doves" (Russian: *belye golubi*). Khlysty believed that Christ was a divine spirit that could indwell an individual member of the sect, or the whole clan collectively. The earliest sources, stemming from the Old Believers' circles of the

seventeenth century, connect the origin of the Khlysty with the figure of elder Kapiton (?–c. 1650), an ascetic from the Kostroma region (Panchenko 103–123). Other local traditions associate the beginnings of the sect with the Kostroma run-away soldier Danila Filippov (?–1700). After an alleged divine revelation on mount Gorodina in 1645, "Lord Sabaoth" came to indwell Danila, who became a "living god" and gave the twelve commandments, including abstention from alcohol, stealing, sexual relations, and marriage. Soon thereafter, Danila's disciple Ivan Suslov became a "christ" (Margaritov 16–17). Suslov's circle, which had a following in Moscow in the seventeenth century, also counted a "theotokos" and the "twelve apostles" among its leaders. The sect included male and female prophets.

The Khlysty practiced severe forms of asceticism, including fasting and sexual abstinence. According to some reports, the gatherings of Khlysty, called *radeniia* (meaning a process of attaining *radost'*, "joy"), began with the group recitation of the Jesus Prayer, the singing of religious folk songs, and continued with ecstatic dancing (whirling, hopping, shrieking), self-flagellation with wooden rods, with a view of entering a trance-like state and being possessed by the "holy spirit" or becoming "Christ." Such psycho-somatic practices were the vehicles for achieving the "spiritual joy" and the "seventh heaven." The ecstatic states were also at times accompanied by glossolalia. The insinuations that *radeniia* in some cases included sexual orgies are denied by the Khlysty. The recriminations of ritual infanticide are most certainly fabricated (Panchenko 154–160). The group's practices became a subject of Andrey Bely's novel *Silver Dove* (1909) and Dmitry Merezhkovsky's *Peter and Alexei* (1905). The notorious Grigory Rasputin, a faith healer, imposter, and false prophet, who was close to the family of the last Russian tsar, Nicholas II, came from the milieu of Russian religious sectarianism, possibly from the circles associated with the Khlysty sect.

Skoptsy appeared in the second part of the eighteenth century as a breakaway group from the Khlysty sect. The Skoptsy took the ascetic ideal of the Klysty to an extreme. The founder of the sect, Kondraty Selivanov, prescribed castration to everyone who wanted to return to the ideal of sexual abstinence, originally preached by the Khlysty ("skopets" is archaic Russian for a "castrate"). The Skoptsy women, according to some reports, also disfigured their bodies in order to make conception and child-rearing impossible. The mystical rites of the Skoptsy were similar to Khlysty's *radeniia* (Bolshakoff 1950: 92–93; Conybeare 363–369).

Apart from the mystical sectarian movements that had a considerable following among common Russian people, it is possible to discern mystical sensibilities in the cultural, artistic, and religious currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theosophical teachings, of marginal interest for the present volume on Christian mysticism, also flourished in Russia before the Revolution of 1917. Most influential trends were associated with the names of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), the artist and philosopher Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947), the composer and philosopher Georges Gurdjieff (1872?–1949), and the writer Daniil Andreev (1906–1959). At the turn of the twentieth century, mystical sensibility suffused the literary circles of Russian Symbolism, including the poets Valery Briusov (1873–1924), Alexander Blok (1880–1921), and Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), as well as the novelists Andrey Bely (1880–1934) and Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1866–1941). The mystical dimension

in art was explored by the painters Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), as well as the composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915). One recent study explores points of contact and draws compelling parallels between the religious explorations of the Russian cultural elites and the popular sectarian movements, such as Khlysty (Etkind 1998).

A comprehensive treatment of all mystical currents in modern Russia remains to be written.

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Modern Catholic Theology and Mystical Tradition

Stephen M. Fields, S.J.

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholic theology gradually recovered the church's mystical tradition, which had entered into an eclipse after its Baroque luminance. Overcoming rationalism, this recovery spurred a deeper probing into the relation between mysticism's symbolic, or kataphatic, expression, and its negation of sense and image, or apophatic dimension. Inquiry focused not only on the sixteenth-century mystics of Spain, but also on Christian Neoplatonism. Denys the Areopagite, Bonaventure, Ignatius Loyola, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila came especially to serve as sources. The reflection conducted on them by an international array of thinkers opens a window on the engaging interplay between Christian experience and dogmatic speculation. Let us begin with a retrospective view of the Baroque.

The Baroque and Rationalism

The contemporary philosopher of culture, Louis Dupré, argues that the passing of this age lost for the west its last great harmony between nature and grace. This was achieved by a dynamic understanding of the human person in its intrinsic relation to its transcendent source (*Passage* 237). In the realm of spirituality, Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) paradigmatically represents the Baroque's explosive energy. Grounded in the vocation of the human person, this movement filled the mundane order with the subject's own divine immanence ("Humanism," Dupré 1991: 181). According to Ignatius, the human person, as the image of God, manifests its Creator more than any other creature, especially in the use of its freedom. Through the mystical gifts of discernment given in prayer, freedom becomes real and authentic ("Humanism" 171). It is liberated from false appearances conjured up by what Ignatius calls "the enemy of our human nature" (Ignatius 4). So unfettered, human volition can recreate the world according

to its own divine image. It posits the highest form of symbols: acts of charity that make God transparent. According to Ignatius, grace is the *sine qua non*, the very condition without which true human freedom cannot obtain.

Dupré thus argues that Ignatius effected "a more radically God-centered view of reality" than had heretofore been possible ("Humanism" 173). Filling Renaissance humanism with mystical content brought the Baroque's dynamism to its pinnacle. God becomes the foundation of the person, even as Creator and creature each retains its appropriate autonomy. Having prayerfully met the divine in its own powers, and having been reformed in the way of Christ, the human person actively responds to grace's ineluctable attractiveness ("Humanism" 178–179). Embodying a paradox, Ignatian mysticism affirms that "the way down [into the person is] the way up [to God]" ("Humanism" 174; for more see Fields, "Baroque").

The kataphatic vision of Ignatius nourished the Baroque world with innovations in education and contemplative life, as did the apophatic mysticism of John of the Cross and the middle ground between them charted by Teresa of Avila (see Mujica, Tsoukatos) (see Chapter 28, this volume). All three lived contemporaneously with the Council of Trent. Although it may be stretching the point to claim the council's teaching as the cause of their endeavors, it is hard to see how these could have thrived without the support of its doctrine. The assertion of nature's dynamic mediation of grace, which lies at the heart of Trent's project, supplied an authoritative foundation for the mysticism inherent in the Jesuit charism and the Carmelite reform. In response to Luther's slogans of faith and grace alone crystallized in his challenge to "works-righteousness," the *Decree on Justification* of 1545–1547 maintained that "the gratuity of grace" does "not deprive human beings of some responsibility for their salvation" (O'Malley 111–112). Nature thus becomes grace's sacrament. The spontaneity of human creativity was appreciated, not only because it follows its own rules and standards, but precisely because, in the complexity of these, it symbolizes the divine (Dupré, *Passage* 237). From the religious experience occasioned by the Creator's acting "immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator," a barrage of moral, social, and aesthetic invention burst forth (Ignatius 12). In and through it, the sublunary world reflects its infinite archetype by abandoning a merely static mimesis. However spontaneous, human ingenuity turns bland when not steeped in transcendence.

But the union of nature and grace that grounded Baroque mysticism resulted from a homogeneously God-centered culture ("Humanism" 180). Ironically, Christian theology made a distinctive contribution to its fracturing. To reassert the rationality of divine revelation over-against the philosophical agnosticism of the Enlightenment, nineteenth-century Neo-Thomism opposed any effort to ground human knowledge in an incipient or seminal grace. Following Aquinas, it defined faith as deriving from an infused supernatural habit. As a result, it is strictly subsequent to reason, argued Joseph Kleutgen (1811–1883), however much it serves as reason's congenially perfecting complement (McCool, *Nineteenth* 7–8). With Catholicism's Modernist controversy at the twentieth century's turn, Neo-Thomism dug in its rationalist heels all the harder. Fearing the relativism of an evolutionary view of truth, it so emphasized the prerogatives of the intellect to make determined judgments that it attenuated the analogy of being (McCool, "Twentieth" S204–207). In turn, human nature, overly strident in its finite independ-

ence, caused theology to devolve into the rationalism that it sought to combat. As reason eclipsed the transcendent as its own vital source, the marriage of nature and grace became further estranged. The sad upshot finds articulation in Michael Buckley's observation that theology paved the way for modern atheism. By confining religion to an intellectual defense of creed and code, it neglected cult, thereby ignoring religion's driving energy in spiritual sensibility (Buckley 362–363).

Phenomenology of Experience

The fortuitous fusion of two developments contemporaneous with the Modernist controversy acted to redress Catholicism's neglect of its mystical cult. One concerns the innovative research of William James (1842–1910), Friedrich von Hügel (1852–1925), and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). They decisively threw the gauntlet down in front of theological rationalism. Dedicated phenomenologists, all three did not advance conclusions a priori, but grounded them inductively in a range of firsthand mystical testimony. The second development concerns the work of Joseph Maréchal, S.J. (1878–1944), and its origins in the thought of Maurice Blondel (1861–1949).

A leader of these pioneers, James delivered his Gifford Lectures of 1901–1902 in Edinburgh on the varieties of religious experience. These treat such topics as the sick soul, the unification of the self, conversion, and saintliness. But the heart of his study lies in the two lectures on mysticism. On the basis of diverse accounts of reliable witnesses, James concludes that, although the mystical experience is transient, it possesses for those who experience it a noetic quality. This is derived from its passivity: its sense of holding the intellect and will by a power defying adequate description. Although firmly authoritative for the mystics themselves, their deliverances also "establish a presumption" for others (James 415). They overthrow "the pretension" of the judgments of empirical sensibility "to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe" (*Varieties* 418). Ironically, the warrant for this overthrow is itself empirical. On the heels of the mystics' insights, which breach the mind's "usual barriers" to the Absolute, good effects result for human life (*Varieties* 410). Energy is augmented, imperfections healed, ideals elevated, and powerful engines for social betterment set in motion.

Whereas James approached his subject as a secular, sympathetic to belief but not ostensibly committed to it, von Hügel approached his as a knowledgeably practicing Catholic. In 1909, he published a detailed study of the life, work, and writings of St. Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510) (see Chapter 25, this volume) and several of her circle. Bringing their story beyond the confines of Italy into the Anglophone world, the Austrian Baron's principal conclusion concerned the driving power of religion as strongly and universally persuasive (1, 367). Of themselves, he argued, creeds, moral codes, and apologetics rarely move the human will to make a pledge, much less to sustain it perseveringly (1, 367). Similar to James's "presumption" established by mystical experience, von Hügel asserted that only the concrete witness of a religious person offers credible evidence to others. It shows how life's major conflicts can be peacefully resolved by communion with the omnipotent and eternal; and how, in the

distinctiveness of a particular personality, the heroic renunciation of transient pleasures can incarnate the divine (1, 368).

Moreover, von Hügel's further conclusion speaks a prophetic word to the rationalism of corporate religion. If the three elements that constitute it are not brought into a synthetic harmony, religion will suffer a tyrannous reduction. The historical-institutional element, closely associated with a practical code of living, demands an unconditional surrender to the external authority of divine revelation. Unless this is tempered by the emotional-volitional or cultic element, it threatens not only to crush the spontaneity of the self, but also to crowd out other branches of knowledge as vulgar and profane (1, 71–72). But the cultic, once enkindled, can itself cause such a pleasurable expansion of consciousness that vocal prayer, sacramental practice, and communal worship seem to constrict and weigh it down (1, 74). Likewise, dogmatic propositions can appear to sap its energetic verve (1, 75). For its part, the creedal-speculative element, once gaining the upper hand, will put pressure on its emotional and institutional counterparts. Because the creedal aspect draws its interpretations of religion from the surrounding culture, it can attenuate what is authentic to revelation, even while it can disvalue affectivity as hostile to its rational universality. In short, von Hügel, although wary of mysticism's unrestrained consequences, convincingly counterpoised it to the prevailing dominance of the cerebral in Catholicism's code and creed.

In 1910, when the Baron's distinguished protégée Evelyn Underhill published her magisterial book, a significant advance occurred. Like James's lectures, her *Mysticism* studied a dizzying array of primary sources, mostly Christian, to obtain insights into the phenomenon's structure. But these insights challenged James's understanding. Subtitling her work "a study of the nature and development of spiritual consciousness," Underhill disclosed an organic pattern of psycho-spiritual growth. This pattern is not transient. On the contrary, while certain of its manifestations like voices and visions are only temporarily sustained, when viewed holistically, mysticism represents the apex of human striving. Moreover, because five stages constitute it, and because these must deliberately be cultivated, mysticism is not, as James averred, merely passive.

Underhill observed that the awakening of religiousness consciousness is often preceded by years of the faithful practice of code and communal cult. Prior to the first stage, which she calls conversion, years of spiritual dryness and struggle often cause affective oscillation, such as Augustine described in *Confessions* VIII (see Chapter 13, this volume). When conversion occurs, it precipitates "a disturbance in the equilibrium of the self" (177). The center of psychic interest, shifting from the subject to the Absolute, usually resolves the previous trials. Although conversion initially confers a joyous sense of the nearness of the providently personal God, the self must be purified, in subsequent stages, of all that defies its new awareness. On the heels of its awakening, consciousness suffers a spontaneous flood of painful realizations of its sin, concupiscence, and recalcitrant attachment to self and sensuality. Exercises that mortify and chasten these prepare it to enter the third stage of illumination.

The most densely populated mystical arena, illumination synthesizes the first two stages into what Underhill called the "sacramental expansion of consciousness" (254). Conferring an awareness of the divine immanent in both the self and external realities,

it also augments praise of the divine transcendence. Subsequent to it, a second stage of purification, called the dark night of the soul in deference to John of the Cross, presages the mystic's arrival at the summit. It proposes to cure the soul of "spiritual gluttony": its "innate tendency to seek and rest in spiritual joys" (395). Acutely painful because of the double sense of abandonment by God and frustration in the world, it ripens into the unitive stage. Here the sacramental expansion of consciousness, consolidated upon reaching its term, possesses the serenity marked by the divine's deep absorption of the person's memory, understanding, and will (416).

In sum, Underhill, like James and von Hügel, undercut the prevailing rationalism of the age by establishing mystical religion as "a form of mental life, a kind of perception, radically different from that of 'normal' men" (232). Catholic theology, usually reactive to, rather than creative of, intellectual ferment, began to take notice. Its attentiveness was enhanced by the Jesuit Joseph Marechal, a francophone Belgian or "Walloon". He served as an inspiring genius of the Thomist revival initiated by *Aeterni patris*, Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical.

Intellectual Intuition

Maréchal published his seminal essay, "On the Feeling of Presence in Mystics and Non-Mystics," in 1908–1909. James had already raised this as a topic of inquiry, and Underhill, as we saw, took it up subsequently (James, *Principles 2*, 322n., in Maréchal, "Feeling" 135, n. 2). The heart of the issue concerns the claim of more advanced mystics to enjoy communion with the absolute unity of reality. This state obtains despite its obvious dissociation "from any concomitant sense impression" (Maréchal, "Feeling" 57). The Jesuit approached the issue wary of reductionism. Assuming the testimonial credibility of Denys, Tauler, Teresa, and John, he ruled out a sufficient cause in the imagination and the discursive intellect. Only first philosophy, metaphysics, not psychology, can supply an answer. Only an intellectual intuition of being as being, unrestricted and infinite, can faithfully explain the evidence of the sources (121). In an intuition, a knowing faculty directly assimilates its object without an intermediary (98). According to the Belgian, an intellectual intuition does not prejudice the self. On the contrary, it raises and transforms the personality by joining it with the object of contemplation. Furthermore, given the essential unity-in-duality of body and soul that constitutes the human person, this assimilation, even as intellectual, can quicken the affectivity (122). The mystics' sense of the divine presence exerts, therefore, both noetic and volitional force.

But humanity, contended Maréchal following Aquinas, does not naturally enjoy an intellectual intuition. On the contrary, only a sensible intuition is congenial to it. Thomas had assumed a basic premise of realism that no concepts are known by the intellect unless they first obtain in sensibility. Knowledge thus entails an actual coincidence of knower and known. By assimilating the object's perceptible form, the subject is configured to the object. This assimilation is purely ontological. No conscious knowledge of it obtains in the subject; nor does the knower possess by means of it alone a conscious knowledge of the object. This results only when the intellect posits a

judgment. But this culminating act of cognition, asserted the Belgian, affirms more than the existence of a finite object over-against the subject who assimilates it.

Precisely in order for any judgment to obtain, the mind must possess a prior orientation to absolute being. Only this non-objective awareness can saturate the empirical datum of sense intuition with the unity that posits it as real. In other words, although the intellect cannot make a judgment apart from sense intuition, still such an intuition is possible only because "the primitive and natural movement of the mind is to affirm being" as such. The sensible object is known because its assimilated form halts this movement. The object effects a finite interlude that contrasts with the mind's yearning for the infinite (100). Fundamentally, therefore, Maréchal emphasized that the intellect is constituted by the "*quest of its intuition*" of "Being pure and simple" (101). Although epistemic laws forbid this intuition, yet the absolute is immanent in the intellect, at least virtually, just as the final cause of any dynamism must, perforce, be immanent in its effect. Consequently, every finite judgment entails "an absolute affirmation of something which surpasses the [merely] sensible" (99). The natural structure of cognition, therefore, constitutes a basis for a mystical sense of the divine presence.

Seeking to avoid rationalism as well as pyschologism, the Jesuit affirmed that only the grace of God can cause the mystics' intellectual intuition. This constitutes "*a state absolutely unattainable by merely human means*" (123). If the mystics' claim of overcoming contingency in an experience of unconditioned unity were evincible by merely natural laws, then these persons should retain a sense of multiplicity sufficient to make the normal judgments of reality. But in the peak of their experience, they deny being able to do so. The Walloon therefore concluded that the same Being who supports and sustains the mystics' cognitive dynamism up to the experience, by an extraordinary act, extends the dynamism into the experience (135). Catholic theology would identify this extraordinary act as a consequence of sanctifying grace.

A reciprocity thus obtains between Maréchal's reading of the mystics and his metaphysics. In "The Feeling of Presence," he laid out in seminal form the thesis of his *magnum opus*, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, four of whose five volumes were first published between 1922 and 1926. The principal volume, *Le Thomisme devant la philosophie critique*, in developing a dialogue between Aquinas and Kant, warranted the theory of the intellect's dynamism in much greater detail than the study of 1908–1909. The theory's origins, however, can be seen in the Belgian's effort to render faithful service to the express statements of Catholicism's spiritual tradition.

Like Newman's 1845 theory of doctrinal development, the Francophone's dynamism of the intellect taught theology a new score. Drowning out rationalism, it served as a leitmotif for virtuosos like the French Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), S.J., the German Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904–1984), and the Swiss Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), especially in compositions about nature and grace. But Maréchal's theme itself adapted the harmony previously sounded by Maurice Blondel, the maestro of Aix-en-Provence, whose *L'Action* (1893) put forth a notion of the will's dynamism that exposes rationalism as talismanic. Its argument centered on the dialectic between the "willed will" and the "willing will." The willed will refers to any specific choice of action. It represents those limited and defined expressions of volition that seek to satisfy the inces-

sant demands of human desires. The willing will refers to the ontological energy that drives the specific choices of the willed will. The willed will is known directly by consciousness. The willing will is known only reflexively through an analysis of the conditions of possibility of the willed will.

By surveying the spheres of human endeavor from sensation through individuality, society, thought, and religion, Blondel exposed the delusion that action evokes in human consciousness. This delusion causes the human person to devolve into "superstition": the collapsing of the two ultimate orders of action, thought and religion, into each other. In mistakenly believing that the successive orders generated by the willed will are capable of bringing about ultimate fulfillment, human consciousness objectifies the absolute. By making the absolute a specific product of the willed will, consciousness tries to capture the ultimate. It thus commits the error of limiting and defining the unlimitable and indefinable (Bouillard 168–172, summarizing Blondel 43–322). As the end or goal of the willing will, the supernatural constitutes a paradox. It is both "[a]bsolutely impossible" for humanity naturally to obtain and yet "absolutely necessary" for humanity's consummation. It follows that the person stands waiting on an existential brink in "felt expectation of an unknown messiah" to which it cannot give birth (Le Grys 481, citing Blondel 388). In other words, humanity, as a religious vocation, yearns for surcease in a "gift" of transcendent value (Le Grys 480–481; Blondel 388). This can only come freely as a fulfilling revelation dovetailing our deepest innate longing.

In sum, we see the melding of ideas that led to the post-Baroque recovery of the church's mysticism. Close studies of the sources produced psychological insights into the phenomenon's structure and its rightful place in integrated religion. Inquiry into its ontological causes resulted in articulating the cognitive dynamism for an intellectual intuition that only grace can confer. A view of human nature as ineluctably tending toward a supernatural end presciently influenced this articulation. Hope more than concepts defines our destiny. Whereas the force of these currents brought theological rationalism down, it nonetheless pressed the next generation with fresh questions.

Spiritual Sensibility

Now prominent on the agenda, mysticism became the subject of dispute about its place in Christianity. A clear illustration can be found in the interpretations of St. Bonaventure (see Chapter 19, this volume) put forth by Rahner and von Balthasar, two titans of twentieth-century theology. The key question that the Seraphic Doctor posed for them concerns the "spiritual senses." These treat the interplay among the human person's faculties of sensation, intellect, and will as they strive in faith toward deeper knowledge of God. They seek to resolve a paradox at the core of Christianity: How can a person attain union with God, if God utterly transcends the finite world and the person, formed by sensation and imagination, is radically immersed in it?

Their disagreement is based on a prior agreement about *Breviloquium* and *The Mind's Road to God*, the places where Bonaventure treats the spiritual senses. These texts describe the three stages that bring about new habits in the soul. In the first or purgative stage, baptism confers the virtue of faith, which generates the gift of reflective understanding.

The soul begins to see the traces, or vestiges, of divine truth in the data that, through sensation and imagination, it assimilates from the objective order of reality. In the second or illuminative stage, the soul receives a habit enabling it to see into the inner principles of faith's mysteries. It knows divine truth by means of the image of God impressed upon it. This truth posits, for instance, that the Word of God constitutes the inner revelation of the perceptibly human Jesus.

Bonaventure subdivided the third or unitive stage, which is properly mystical, into three levels. The first gives the soul an intellectual apprehension. A "contuition," it perceives the essential relation between the sensuously intuited traces of divine knowledge and the first principles that ground them. These are the divine ideas, the exemplary causes of creation, which establish the truth of all that is. The next two levels move the soul beyond knowing God through anything created. They occur when the soul receives a directly infused grace that allows it to enjoy union with God as he exists in himself. In ecstasy, the second level, the intellect becomes darkened while the will attains a loving union. In rapture, the third level, the intellect receives an extraordinary vision, such as St. Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, and Moses enjoyed when God, having hidden him in the cleft of the mountain, shielded his eyes in passing by (Rahner, "Doctrine" 111–113, 117).

According to Rahner, Bonaventure conceived the spiritual senses, not as acts of the corporeal senses that have been elevated by grace, but as grace-aided acts of the intellect and the will in a soul essentially independent of the body. They are activated in the last stage of the mind's journey, where they perceive their object: direct contact with God's transcendence ("Doctrine" 110, 112, 114). In positing this object, Rahner criticized Bonaventure, who sometimes seems to locate the object of the spiritual senses at the second stage of illumination. Here the object is the Word of God incarnate in Christ. Such a specification, the German claimed, degenerates into a contrivance. Each spiritual sense only arbitrarily receives a rationale to justify its mode of perception. Spiritual hearing is said to perceive the harmonic voice of the uncreated Word; spiritual sight, to see the Word's uncreated light and beauty; spiritual taste, to savor the sweetness of the Word; spiritual smell, to sniff the sweet aroma of the inspired Word; and spiritual touch, to grasp the incarnate Word in an intimate union. For Rahner, only sight, taste, and touch enjoy any credible alignment, and then only when their object is God's transcendence as such ("Doctrine" 114–115).

He thus focused on showing how sight, taste, and touch apply to the perceptions of the first two levels of the unitive way. Sight is properly mystical, because contuition enters into union with the divine ideas through an act of grace. Taste designates the will's savoring of what sight understands. These two senses perceive divine knowledge as it is mediated through the finite effects of God's activity. They prepare the soul for perfect contemplation, which in ecstasy knows God immediately ("Doctrine" 115–117). A loving act of the will, ecstasy touches God more in *sentire*, feeling, than in *cognoscere*, conceptual knowledge ("Doctrine" 119). By contrast, rapture grasps God in a direct, intellectual vision, even as the beatific vision directly grasps him in both intellect and will ("Doctrine" 117–121). Ecstatic touch accounts for the mystics' claim of "learned ignorance." Because the divine essence touches only the will, ecstasy is learned, but also ignorant, because the intellect is excluded ("Doctrine" 123–126).

By contrast, Balthasar rejected Rahner's dualist interpretation. According to the Swiss, Bonaventure viewed the soul as unable to attain any disembodied perfection. Body and soul are necessarily oriented to each other for the sake of the human person's unity (Balthasar, *Glory* 2, 315–317). As a result of its unity-in-duality, the person possesses a double range of senses, one inner or spiritual, and one outer or corporeal. This range is not organized into two coordinated parallel faculties. On the contrary, it constitutes an integral continuity. The spiritual senses occupy that range of the continuum, which, elevated by grace, perceives the supra-sensuous, transcendent world precisely within the sensuous, empirical world (*Glory* 2, 320). Allowing a mutual mediation between the lower and the higher capabilities, the spiritual senses bind sensation and imagination to intellect and will. Even when perceiving the higher reaches of divine knowledge, spirit remains grounded in corporeality (*Glory* 2, 317–318).

Human sensibility is thus analogous. This axiom explains why the spiritual senses reach their full development in the second or illuminative stage (*Glory* 2, 320–321). Disputing Rahner, Balthasar criticized the Seraphic Doctor as "extravagant" when he seems sometimes to locate spiritual sensibility in the unitive stage (*Glory* 2, 324). Even when spirit undergoes an apophatic mystical experience that purportedly negates the corporeal senses and imagination, it is still bound to faith's sensible perception of the Word incarnate in history. Only in and through the Christ-form can the intellect and will extend themselves further, within their union with the body, to ecstasy and rapture (*Glory* 2, 321–323). Mysticism springs forth from corporeality "like fire from sticks that are rubbed together" (*Glory* 2, 323).

Learned ignorance results when all the spiritual senses have reached their full activation in the second stage's assimilation of the enfleshed Logos. Then in the third stage, they enter into an ascetic negation. Forfeited are the pleasures in prayer enjoyed in illumination's habitual contemplation of the Messiah. Although this denial entails a darkening, still it is no "non-experience," as some contemplatives claim, but precisely an "*experience* of non-experience" (Balthasar, *Glory* 1, 413). It occurs so that the spiritual senses might be conformed to the paschal mystery. Like the crucified Lord, they die in order to wait, seemingly forsaken, for the resurrection (*Glory* 2, 325). Learned ignorance thus serves as a transition from illumination to union. If mystical gifts come, they must derive their validation expressly from the experience of Christ (*Glory* 1, 413). As a result, their darkening in the third stage means for Balthasar that, when Bonaventure's journey to God becomes apophatic, it loses "general theological interest" (*Glory* 1, 373). It becomes esoteric. Its relation to Christ is less demonstrable than its relation to illumination. It should be mentioned that here Balthasar's account of learned ignorance suffered. Regrettably, it did not account for the role of contuition in the transition from illumination to union.

In sum, whereas both thinkers wanted to discern where the spiritual senses reach their climax, they stood at loggerheads. Rahner offered an apophatic interpretation that focused on the journey's third and final stage. It understood Bonaventure to divorce the spiritual from the corporeal senses and to align them with the soul's higher powers. As the physical senses are negated, the intellect and will attain a mystical union with the utterly Transcendent. Balthasar offered a kataphatic interpretation that focused on the journey's second stage. Here the spiritual senses are always aligned with the bodily

senses. They reach their perfection when they perceive the revelation of the Word sensibly present in human form. These two versions of the same classical treatise can be explained, at least partially, by the lenses through each views it. As such, Bonaventure's mysticism can provide a perspective from which to scan contemporary theology's view of Christian transcendence.

Christian Transcendence

Joseph Maréchal's most distinguished disciple, Rahner understood transcendence according to a notion central to his theology, the "supernatural existential." This put forth a model of the relation between nature and grace based on the dialectic between faith and reason. In explaining how humanity, by its rational nature, is ordered to the Absolute, the German relied on the Belgian's theory of cognition. The intellect, in order to know the universal concept in sensuously intuited data, must be able to pass beyond the limits of all particular concepts that it knows (Rahner, *World* 209). On the basis of this *excessus*, absolute being, according to Rahner, is preapprehended. It is not objectified like finite realities, but constitutes the infinite horizon against which all finite objects can be known (Rahner, *World* 145, 209). Consistent with Maréchal, he affirmed that the absolute, as humanity's goal, end, and purpose, must be immanent in the intellect (Rahner, *Foundations* 21). All causes are present in their effects. This immanence gives the intellect and will their dynamism. God becomes a constitutive a priori of human rationality known, however, only reflexively: only as the explanation of the finite judgments that, in the first instance, are consciously present to the mind (Rahner, *Foundations* 21–22). Affirmed in this way, knowledge of God's existence, but not his essence, falls appropriately within nature's ambit as "general revelation."

Rahner incorporated the Walloon's metaphysics into his own theology. Faith, he affirmed, shows us that God has revealed himself, not just generally, but "categorically": concretely and historically in Jesus Christ. This utterly gratuitous event cannot, in any sense, be inferred from nature. But it has perpetually altered nature. It therefore follows that the preapprehended horizon of infinite being actually subsists within the order of grace, the only concretely existing historical order. The horizon represents a disposition for grace, even an implicit offer of grace. In no sense does it compel human beings to accept grace. This implicit offer is the supernatural existential. Were there no grace, general revelation would continue to obtain. In this sense, the preapprehended horizon can be considered a natural desire for God and an instinct of faith. The theoretical possibility of its existence without grace safeguards grace's gratuity. This possibility entails that humanity could be fulfilled in a natural end as unaided reason might infer it (Rahner, *Foundations* 55–57; ch. 4, esp. 126–133). It also makes pure nature into what Rahner called a "remainder concept." In other words, pure nature would be left over were we able to subtract grace from the concrete historical order that we know. We cannot, of course, do this, nor has humanity ever been bereft of grace (Rahner, "Relationship" 312–313).

Rahner thus understood Christian faith as consciously developing a potential for transcendence already immanent in human nature. Metaphysics, conducted independently of revelation, reveals that judgments affirming the existence of finite realities bear

the mark of the Absolute implicitly released in them. The preapprehension endows sensibility with the potential to become a medium of grace prior to any explicit act of faith. Faith does not directly establish metaphysics, but it does render the implicitly graced content of metaphysics explicit. Moreover, it allows the will to act on what the intellect in faith affirms.

Given his view of Christian transcendence, it is reasonable that Rahner should have seen Bonaventure's conception of the spiritual senses as terminating in apophatic mysticism. This goal reflects Rahner's concern to constitute humanity as the only creature whose "natural" center lies extrinsic to itself in the Absolute beyond all objectification. Of course the preapprehension, which establishes this center, is not explicitly mystical. It does not constitute an immediate consciousness of the divine intimacy. Nonetheless, it serves as the ontological foundation of such a consciousness. Through the prayerful cultivation of a life of faith, the preapprehension can develop from an implicitly known horizon into a consciously known immediacy (Rahner, "Experience" 176–177; *Church* 11–14). Rahner leaves us one step shy of affirming with Maréchal that this development consists of the intellectual intuition of sanctifying grace. Taking another path, he used the Belgian's seminal insight to posit a "mysticism of everyday life." According to it, the preapprehension remotely inspires all acts of heroic virtue whose ultimate meaning relies on trust rather than transparently expressible reasons. These include forgiving without reward, following one's conscience despite opposition, and unconditionally loving other human beings (Rahner, "Everyday" 39). By these criteria, anyone can become what might be called an "anonymous" mystic, although Catholic theology would affirm that, apart from baptism by water, blood, or desire, such acts could not be salvifically meritorious.

Balthasar, critical of the vestiges of Cartesian dualism that he perceived in Maréchal and Rahner, rooted his view of Christian transcendence in an innovative interpretation of the fifth century corpus attributed to the Pseudo-Areopagite. It shattered him as the long hailed paradigm of apophaticism. No mere "mystical iconoclast," Denys skillfully balanced contemplative negation and kataphatic revelation (*Glory* 2, 169). To do so, he drew on the Neoplatonic motif of emanation and return. The created order of being, in flowing forth from God, reveals the hidden Absolute in sensible manifestations. These become artifacts of the divine, fashioned by the creativity that infinitely surpasses them (*Glory* 2, 164–165). A reciprocity between history and transcendence ensues. Ever immanent in finite realities, the One remains equally occluded from full comprehension. The ascending movement of creation's return to its Creator, epitomized in the human person's act of faith, is initiated only by God's gracious descent (*Glory* 2, 165). Authentic Christianity lodges in the heart of this dialectic. If the finite ensues from the infinite, it is only in the finite that the infinite is encountered. Denys thus displayed a sacramental vision of the cosmos, which discloses the core of being as nothing less than the beauty of the God who constitutes it (*Glory* 2, 166).[1]

As essentially aesthetic, Christianity requires "the mediation of an understanding spirit" to hear "the sensible symbols" of the world "speak of God" (*Glory* 2, 184). But the faith that for Balthasar effected this mediation far exceeds the existential act of a surrendering person (*fides qua creditur*). Vitally, it entails *fides quae creditur* , the faith that is believed. This constitutes the certain assent of the intellect to divinely revealed content (*Glory* 1, 131). It affirms, for instance, the Triune God in and through the

evidence of the Incarnation (*Glory* 1, 151). *Fides quae creditur* renders the mind capable of perceiving the forms of grace available in Christ and through him implicitly in the world. Insofar as the intellect is transformed, so are the other faculties that it animates. When faith is received in a noetic act that grants all the human powers a share in its object, Gnosticism confronts its nemesis. Permeating the bodily senses and imagination, faith cannot be purely spiritualized. Nor as divinely revealed knowledge can it be reduced to the myths of pure fancy (*Glory* 1, 131–133, 139–140). In short, faith plunges humanity into Christ, *the* symbol of God; and through Christ, it lifts us into the Godhead whom he embodies.

Mysticism, as the fruit of faith, subsists, for Balthasar, within Christian aesthetics. "[A]ny flight from [God's immanence in the world] is unthinkable, even for the most exalted" contemplation (*Glory* 2, 166). Because sensible reality is constituted by the divine Artisan's free act, any apophatic movement in prayer never escapes the analogy between finite and infinite beauty. This analogy does not deny that the more creation reveals of God the more it hides (*Glory* 2, 194).[2] But it does affirm that in Christianity the ecstatic transcendence of the sensible order entails a simultaneous penetration into it (*Glory* 2, 169).[3] Based on this view of mysticism's relation to Christian transcendence, Balthasar's interpretation of Bonaventure stressed the continuity of human sensibility. Although this did not preclude the apophatic, it did decisively subordinate it to the Incarnation's kataphatic emanation in history.

The Swiss thinker undoubtedly overstated his case, however, in claiming that the apophatic loses general theological interest. If with Maréchal we understand the apophatic as the mystics' sense of cosmic unity that exceeds all objectification, then there seems no reason to deny that it could be an intellectual intuition of the Trinity's love and goodness. Such an intuition, owing to sanctifying grace, would be the expected result of a contemplative penetration into the Logos in Christ and, through it, of the mystics' being returned to the heart of the Godhead (see Fields, "Senses").

Our journey into the relation between religious experience and theological speculation has taken us from the Baroque highpoint of Christian mysticism, through its denouement, and into its twentieth-century recovery as a source of system and doctrine. Our inquiry must now be left on the threshold of questions that fall to thinkers of the current day. Important tasks stand ready, including the need to address the following: (1) assessing how Balthasar and Rahner jointly contribute to a mystical theology grounded equally in the sources, in Christology, and in a viable anthropology; (2) integrating mysticism into a psychology of the virtues; (3) inquiring if and how authentic mysticism can obtain outside the Christian faith; and (4) probing into whether advances in brain physiology and artificial intelligence will render spurious the mystics' transcendent claims. Perhaps this last question presses us with the greatest immediacy.

Notes

1   See Denys, *Epistolae* 6, 7, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia graeca* (*PG*), vol. 3, 1077A ff.
2   See ibid., 3, in *PG* 3, 1069B.
3   See Denys, *De divinis nominibus* 4, 13; 5, 10; in *PG* 3,712AB, 825B.

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Mystics of the Twentieth Century

Mary Frohlich, R.S.C.J.

T he twentieth century has been a time of great ferment in the understanding of mysticism. The word "mystic" and its related terms have entered the popular vocabulary and have been applied to a very wide variety of people and phenomena. Although this essay is not primarily focused on issues related to the definition of mysticism, it will be impossible to make a selection of twentieth-century "mystics" without some preliminary attention to this question.

Since the history of ideas about mysticism is covered elsewhere in this volume, I will skip directly to a typological summary of contemporary theories. I find the following four general perspectives predominant in most discussions:

1 Mysticism is transcendence to a non-intentional core dimension beyond any awareness of subject and object. The mystic is defined as someone giving evidence of having entered into a supra-experiential dimension in which all ordinary approaches to perceiving and knowing no longer function.
2 Mysticism is intense, extraordinary spiritual experiences such as visions, raptures, ecstasies, and/or paranormal phenomena. This is the most common person-on-the-street view. The mystic is understood to be a person who has highly unusual, sometimes bizarre or paranormal, spiritual experiences.
3 Mysticism is performance of a mystical drama. In the case of Christians, it is the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection that is played out in this mystical drama.
4 Mysticism is a language-event evoking mystery. Analyzing language identified as mystical, scholars find that it employs certain techniques – paradox being a primary one – that have the effect of exploding ordinary categories of meaning and thus evoking a sense of "mystery" in the hearer or reader. The mystic, then, is a master of these linguistic techniques.

It is significant that the first three of these correlate descriptively with the last three sets of dwelling places outlined by St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) in her *Interior Castle* (see Chapter 28, this volume). She describes the Fifth Dwelling Places as a condition in which the faculties "are asleep to the things of the world and to ourselves . . . An uprooting from the soul of all the operations it can have while being in the body" (Teresa of Avila 336–337). The Sixth Dwelling Places are full of various kinds of visions, raptures, mystical death, and other intense interior phenomena. In the Seventh Dwelling Places, the soul is so profoundly united to God that its actions become part of God's own action in the world. Thus, even though contemporary theories are most often non-theological, there is a certain descriptive convergence with classical Christian tradition about what constitutes mysticism.

The theory of mysticism as a language-event arises when scholars focus on the fact that it is impossible to know anything about the experience (or supra-experience) of a purported mystic; all we can know is what that person or someone else says about it. This very modern (i.e. post-Kantian) approach provides a salutory reminder that the identification of who is or is not a "mystic" remains an imperfect science.

Each of these perspectives, taken alone, would tend to identify a different group of individuals as primary examples of the mystic. I believe a better approach is to allow each to have a voice. In a sense, they provide four basic criteria for affirming that someone might be a mystic: evidence of radical transcendence, extraordinary spiritual experiences, public dramatic enactment of core mystery, and specific language techniques. Some mystics are much more highly developed in one of these dimensions than in the others, while others manifest all four.

It is not possible to provide a completely inclusive survey of twentieth-century mystics in a short essay. I have chosen, therefore, to identify several typical movements in this period and then to provide brief profiles of some individuals who exemplify each one. The movements I have selected are: (1) Bearers of the Passion; (2) Scholars and Writers; (3) Interfaith Boundary Crossers; and (4) Advocates for the Reign of God. Not surprisingly, a number of the individuals selected for the profiles actually could have fitted into more than one category.

One further comment before getting down to business. I regret that my selection includes few mystics from beyond the European and American worlds. However, the limitations of my own expertise, as well as the difficulties of access to sources, have resulted in a selection that is still quite eurocentric. I hope that the next time an essay like this is written, the global character of Christianity will be far more in evidence.

Bearers of the Passion

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, a movement that came to be known as "victim spirituality" began gathering steam (Burton). While it had ancient antecedents, the movement drew most directly upon seventeenth-century Berullian and Sacred Heart spirituality (see Chapter 29, this volume). Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629) taught a radical theocentrism that demanded an attitude of self-annihilation and servitude

on the part of the devotee. The Berullian school contributed to the new impetus given to Sacred Heart spirituality by John Eudes and Margaret Mary Alacoque, who promoted the participation of Christians in the reparative work of Christ through their prayer, sacrifice, and suffering. In mid-nineteenth-century France, several spiritual teachers took up this theme of reparation with an explicit emphasis on the value of offering oneself as a "victim soul." The victim soul makes an oblation of herself to suffer with Christ to make up for the damage caused by human sin. While in theory this is an *acceptance* of suffering rather than a *seeking* of pain, the fine line between the two is sometimes blurred.

Many mystics of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were deeply attracted by this spirituality, which focused on the Christian value of suffering. In terms of the four perspectives on mysticism noted above, this was often manifested in an intense awareness of being the central figure in a public and communal enfleshment of the Passion of Christ. It is noteworthy that a disproportionate number of the mystics who were drawn to victim spirituality were women, although promoters of the spirituality were often men. In addition to the four women profiled here, others whose mystical spirituality participated in this pattern included Leon Bloy, Adrienne von Speyr, Josefa Menendez, Therese Neumann, Padre Pio, Marthe Robin, and Audrey Santos.

In April 1888 fifteen-year-old Thérèse Martin (1873–1897), the youngest of five daughters in a very pious ultramontane French family, entered Lisieux Carmel. She took the religious name "Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face." In 1895 she began writing the first part of the spiritual autobiography that was later presented to the world as *The Story of a Soul*. By this time she was already manifesting symptoms of the pulmonary tuberculosis that would lead to her death in September of 1897. *The Story of a Soul* and its message became immensely popular, and devotion to Thérèse spread around the world. She was canonized in 1925 and named a Doctor of the Church in 1997, the centenary of her death.

Thérèse's autobiography recounts few unusual spiritual experiences, instead focusing much more on the challenges and graces encountered in very ordinary life situations. The quiet transformation that Thérèse was undergoing ultimately came to a head on the feast of the Holy Trinity in 1895, when she felt urgently drawn to make her "Act of Oblation to Merciful Love" (Thérèse of Lisieux 1996). Just before this, she later wrote, she "was seized with such a violent love for God that I can't explain it except by saying it felt as though I were totally plunged into fire" (Thérèse of Lisieux 1977: 77). The Act of Oblation culminates with an impressive statement of the mystical spirituality that was brewing in Thérèse's soul:

> In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I OFFER MYSELF AS A VICTIM OF HOLO-CAUST TO YOUR MERCIFUL LOVE, asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of *infinite tenderness* shut up within You to overflow into my soul, and that thus I may become a *martyr* of Your *Love*, O my God!
>
> May this martyrdom, after having prepared me to appear before You, finally cause me to die and may my soul take its flight without any delay into the eternal embrace of *Your Merciful Love*. (Thérèse of Lisieux 1996: 277)

In this statement Thérèse reacts against those among her compatriots who identified the spirituality of suffering in terms of being a victim of God's wrathful revenge for sin. Thérèse instead articulates the core of "victim spirituality" as complete self-offering in union with God's saving love.

Thérèse's greatest challenge was yet to come. During the last eighteen months of her life, as her physical suffering continually increased in intensity, she was also undergoing a profound "night of faith" in which she lost all immediate awareness of the presence of God. Commentators debate whether this is an example of John of the Cross's mystical "Dark Night of the Spirit" (see Chapter 28, this volume). Perhaps the best evidence that Thérèse did indeed undergo the fullness of mystical transformation is the immense fruitfulness her life has manifested since her death.

The Italian Gemma Galgani (1878–1903) was Thérèse's opposite in her predilection for the unusual. While she was still a child, her family was thrust into poverty when her mother died and her father became seriously ill. Gemma herself endured a number of serious illnesses, many of them related to the tuberculosis from which she would eventually die. She began to experience regular "visits" from her guardian angel and another mysterious figure, with whom she prayed for restoration to health. Miraculously healed of the worst effects of her illness, she tried several times to enter convents but was always refused. She regularly experienced the stigmata, as well as bloody sweats, trance-like ecstasies, and a burning in her heart so intense that it that left burn marks on her chest.

During the last two years of Gemma's life, members of the family with whom she was living recorded many of the words she spoke while in her ecstasies. Gemma also wrote about her experiences in an autobiography, diary, and letters. Here is an example of one of her ecstatic utterances:

> Oh love, oh infinite love! . . . Strip me of this flesh; either tear me out of this body or stop, because I cannot go on . . . My body, oh Lord, can no longer stand being continually consumed, so, either remove me from this earth or stop . . . When, when will I unite with you, oh Lord, who with such forceful love keep me in union here on earth? . . . Do it, do it! . . . Let me die, and die of love! . . . What a beautiful death, oh Lord, to die a victim of love . . . a victim for you! (Bell and Mazzoni 147)

In this statement Gemma's mystical spirituality converges with that of Thérèse, despite their marked differences of style. She was canonized in 1933.

Simone Weil (1909–1943) was of upper middle class French Jewish heritage, although she never really self-identified as a Jew. Intellectually brilliant, she studied philosophy and spent several years teaching in rural high schools. From early on she was noted as an exceptionally gifted writer. At age twenty-five she decided to spend a year as a factory worker, living on her earnings and experiencing all the degradation that the workers underwent. Subsequently she joined the anarchist militia in the Spanish Civil War. As she began to experience more and more intense pain from migraine headaches and other ailments, she also was drawn more and more urgently to Christ. Yet she refused baptism, convinced that God was calling her to remain at the threshold of the church, united with all that are left outside. When France fell to

the Germans during World War II, Weil joined the Free French in London. Found to be suffering from tuberculosis, she nonetheless refused to eat more than the starving children in France were allotted. She died from illness and malnutrition at the age of thirty-four.

Weil's life choices gave dramatic expression to her Christological conviction that God is found most authentically in the very places that are most distant from God. For this reason she believed that the most all-encompassing spiritual transformation derives from the embrace of what she called "affliction":

> Extreme affliction, which means physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation, all at the same time, is a nail whose point is applied at the very center of the soul, and whose head is all necessity spreading through space and time.
>
> Affliction is a marvel of divine technique. It is a simple and ingenious device which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold. The infinite distance separating God from the creature is entirely concentrated into one point to pierce the soul in its center . . .
>
> The one whose soul remains ever turned toward God though the nail pierces it finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe. It is the true center; it is not in the middle; it is beyond space and time; it is God. (Weil 134)

Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997) was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Albania. She witnessed poverty, wars, massacres, and famines both during her childhood in Albania and later as a Loreto nun serving in Calcutta, India. In the fall of 1946, while on a train ride from Calcutta to Darjeeling, her soul was possessed by the conviction that Christ was calling her to assuage his thirst by caring for those most abandoned and dehumanized. She left her congregation to found the Missionaries of Charity, whose purpose she articulated as "to satiate the thirst of Jesus Christ on the Cross for Love and Souls" (Mother Teresa 41).

Although at first she felt joy in companioning Jesus in his thirst, it was not long before she found herself falling into an abyss of spiritual darkness and emptiness. This continued, more or less unabated, until the end of her life. She wrote:

> The darkness is so dark – and I am alone. – Unwanted, forsaken. – The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable. – Where is my faith? – Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness. – My God – how painful is this unknown pain . . . When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my soul . . . In spite of all this – this darkness and emptiness is not as painful as the longing for God. (Mother Teresa 187)

This radical experience of the absence of God is shocking to see in a woman who, for over fifty years, poured out her entire being in service to God and neighbor. However, it does have an explanation in mystical literature. John of the Cross wrote this about the deep interior caverns of the soul:

> The capacity of these caverns is deep because the object of this capacity, namely God, is profound and infinite. Thus in a certain fashion their capacity is infinite, their thirst is

infinite, their hunger is also deep and infinite, and their languishing and suffering are infinite death. (John of the Cross 3: 22)

Jan Ruusbroec (see Chapter 22, this volume) also wrote about "an eternal hunger which can nevermore be satisfied" as a sign of "the life of love at the highest level of its activity" (Ruusbroec 114–115). These four women who felt the mystical call to share the passion of Christ in the very core of their being illustrate the meaning of this hard saying.

Scholars and Writers

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a growing interest in mysticism on the part of intellectuals and artists. Many were influenced by occult movements such as the Rosicrucians or the followers of Madame Blavatsky. Others explored the thought and practices of Asian religions. Sometimes this interest in mysticism was strongly anti-religious, regarding mysticism as a kind of liberation beyond the constraints of all institutions, traditions, and language. Christian scholars and artists, however, were also influenced by this milieu of exploration (Schloesser). The study and practice of mysticism began to regain some of the respectability that it had lost during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Chapter 33, this volume).

A second wave of public fascination with mysticism began to build in the 1960s. This coincided with strong cultural and societal movements rejecting many traditional institutions, including religions. Experimentation with Hindu and Buddhist meditation practices, as well as with hallucinogenic drugs, was widespread. It became almost commonplace to encounter people reporting to have had mystical experiences. A survey of article titles in journals of art and literature from the 1970s reveals a vogue of referring to major twentieth-century artists and their work as "mystical," although rarely did this have any connection to Christian faith. The persons profiled here were most influenced by the earlier phase of this movement.

In France, the home of Raïssa Maritain (1883–1960) and her husband Jacques (1882–1973) became a center where many scholars and artists with mystical interests gathered. Jacques, raised Protestant, and Raïssa, raised Jewish, went through a period of near-despair before eventually converting to Roman Catholicism. Several years later they discovered Thomist thought, and found it profoundly congenial to their own inner experience. Subsequently Jacques became a very highly regarded neo-Scholastic philosopher while Raïssa, who suffered throughout her life from poor health, spent her time praying and writing poetry. In 1912 they made the unusual choice to practice celibacy within marriage, so as to devote themselves completely to the pursuit and sharing of truth. The warm hospitality and friendship that they extended to dozens of people, believers and non-believers alike, gave witness to the depth of their Christian conversion. Among their friends were many other scholars and artists, including Leon Bloy, Georges Rouault, Jean Cocteau, and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

From early in their married life Raïssa Maritain was drawn into deep interior prayer. Much of what Jacques later wrote about mysticism was based on Raïssa's experiences.

For the Maritains there is no such thing as "natural mysticism"; rather, mystical experience is a superconceptual degree of infused contemplation, which always remains grounded in the grace of faith. In her journal, Raïssa recorded the inexorable journey of her soul into the embrace of God. Here is an entry from 1924:

> My soul can no longer accept anything from reflections, comparisons, images, symbols, savours, fervours – even though the light of God glimmers in all these things. It can no longer be nourished except by that utterly pure light, even though to the soul it be darkness and therefore surpassing all understanding. (Maritain 164)

Later, Raïssa went through a long period of aridity and anguish, thus sharing something of the experience of those who understood their vocation in terms of bearing the passion of Christ.

In England during the same period of time, the Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) was also gaining a following. Underhill began her personal mystical journey with the exploration of a kind of occult magic, as a member of the "Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn." Shortly before her wedding in 1907, she had a powerful conversion experience that convinced her that Roman Catholicism was the truth. Her fiancé, however, could not accept her becoming a Catholic, so she put the question on the back burner and took a more solitary path. In 1910 she published her massive study *Mysticism*, a pioneering work that established her reputation as a major contributor to the re-establishment of studies on mysticism. Underhill's own spiritual life was often far more troubled than her self-assured prose let on. In 1922, under the guidance of the lay Catholic spiritual director and writer Baron von Hügel, she finally re-joined the Anglican church. She wrote many more tomes on mysticism and what she called "the mystical way" of spiritual practice. Her most original theological contribution was an early form of "Spirit Christology," which places the emphasis on the Spirit rather than on Jesus as the center of God's redemptive initiative.

Although Underhill and the Maritains were contemporaries, their approaches to mysticism diverged considerably. Underhill tended to regard the mystic way as the center of all religion, and thus accessible to all. For her, all mysticism was, in a sense, "natural." It was only later in life, and long after several of her best-known works were written, that she came to terms with the centrality of Christ in Christianity. Her gift was to describe the life of interior prayer in simple, down-to-earth images and concepts that attract people to practice it. For example:

> So many Christians are like deaf people at a concert. They study the program carefully, believe every statement made in it, speak respectfully of the quality of the music, but only really hear a phrase now and then. So they have no notion at all of the mighty symphony which fills the universe, to which our lives are destined to make their tiny contribution, and which is the self-expression of the Eternal God. (Underhill 16)

The mystic, in her view, is the person who becomes open to full participation in that majestic depth of reality, this "mighty symphony," that so vastly exceeds the grasp of the small human mind and soul. Since Underhill only rarely wrote in the first person,

it is difficult to assess the character of her own mystical experience. Yet there is no question that she is major wisdom figure in the twentieth-century history of Christian mysticism, pointing out the path and providing prudent guidance for several generations of spiritual seekers. Among her friends and correspondents were T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sir James Frazier.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) was raised in a traditional French Catholic family and became a Jesuit priest. After his ordination he was sent to study geology, but his studies were interrupted by World War I. He chose to serve at the front as a stretcherbearer and chaplain. Some of his most intense mystical experiences occurred at this time, in the midst of the horror of trench warfare. After the war he completed his studies and began to set forth a deeply original perspective that integrated the theory of biological evolution into spirituality and theology.

From early childhood Teilhard felt a luminous quality emanating from the earthiness of matter. Reflecting back at the end of his life, he summarized the vision that undergirded his life thus:

> Crimson gleams of matter, gliding imperceptibly into the gold of spirit, ultimately to be transformed into the incandescence of a universe that is person . . . The diaphany of the divine at the heart of a glowing universe, as I have experienced it through contact with the earth – the divine radiating from the depths of blazing matter. (Teilhard 1976: 16)

Teilhard's theology envisioned Christ as the "Omega point" of the universe, drawing every atom of matter toward himself and a final cosmic celebration of unity. Through the incarnation, Christ has been revealed at the center of all things; he "shines at the common heart of things, as a center that is infinitely intimate to them and at the same time (since it coincides with universal fulfillment) infinitely distant" (Teilhard 1965: 57). This theology, however, was not simply an intellectual exercise for Teilhard; it sprang from his unique gift of sensitivity to a visionary dimension of the world to which few have access. Sometimes this overflowed into literal visions, like the one of Christ shining with "an indescribable shimmer or iridescence" that he described in *Hymn of the Universe* (Teilhard 1961: 41–46). This does not seem to have been an isolated experience, but rather an intensification of a mode of awareness with which he was gifted throughout his life.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) may be the best known of all twentieth-century mystics, in large part due to the charm and insight expressed in his many writings. He was born in France to two artists, both of whom died by the time he was sixteen. He was kicked out of Cambridge University for wild behavior, then attended Columbia University where he flourished. In 1938 he joined the Roman Catholic church. His writing was already attracting positive attention when, in 1941, he left everything behind to join the Trappists at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky. Before long he was writing again, this time essays and books on spirituality and, in particular, his own spiritual reflections. In 1948 his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, created a sensation. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold in its first few years, establishing Merton's reputation as a major voice for contemplative spirituality.

By the late 1950s Merton began to be increasingly drawn to write about the social problems of the time, such as the threat of nuclear war, racial unrest, and the need for non-violent practices. He formed friendships through letter-writing with many leading thinkers and activists, including Daniel Berrigan, Coretta Scott King, and the Nicaraguan Pablo Antonio Cuadra. He grew in the conviction that only contemplative transformation can really get at the root of evil, which resides in human failure to be those radiantly loving beings that God has created us to be.

During the same period Merton was being intensely drawn to the exploration of eastern spirituality. This fascination eventually led to his tour of Asia in 1968, during which he met with the Dalai Lama and, tragically, was electrocuted by a malfunctioning fan in Bangkok, Thailand.

Merton had a remarkable gift for expressing the nature of mystical experience in a way that was both profound and simple. Describing contemplation, he wrote:

> At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives . . . This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (Merton 158)

As is evident from the brief quotations included in these profiles, the writings of twentieth century-mystics like the Maritains, Underhill, Teilhard, and Merton retain their power to nurture new generations of mystical seekers.

Interfaith Boundary Crossers

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many westerners began to be fascinated by mystical traditions other than the Christian ones of their own cultural heritage. Throughout the twentieth century the knowledge and practice of these traditions became increasingly available in the west, both through the arrival of spiritual teachers and through increased ease of travel to Asian and Arabic countries. While many dabbled in such traditions as Sufism, Zen, or Yoga, others plunged in fully and eventually became full-fledged adepts and teachers. In the vast majority of cases this meant leaving Christianity behind and explicitly identifying with the other religious tradition. A few people, however, felt a personal call to retain their central identification as Christian while living in radical openness to the wisdom of another religious tradition. As the witness of Charles de Foucauld and Bede Griffiths demonstrates, to do this with integrity demands entering upon a profound mystical journey.

The other two individuals profiled, Nicholas Black Elk and Sundar Singh, represent those who crossed the boundary in the other direction. Raised and educated in a

religious tradition other than Christianity, each experienced a call to become Christian without rejecting his original cultural heritage. For them also, the cross-fertilization of traditions was lived on the level of mystical prayer.

Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) was born to an aristocratic French family. He spent his youth in hi-jinks and pleasure-seeking. At age twenty-one he graduated at the bottom of his military academy class and was sent to Algeria to battle Arab rebels. Fascinated by the North African landscape and peoples, he left the military and undertook a year of a solitary exploration of Morocco. He was so impressed by Muslim piety that in 1886 he returned to the Roman Catholic church, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and then entered a Trappist Monastery in Syria. Yet he was not at peace in the monastic life, for he was feeling a deep call to live in poverty, labor and hiddenness like that of Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth.

After seven years, Foucauld left the Trappists and went to work as a laborer in Nazareth. Convinced by others that he should become a priest, he did theological studies and was ordained in 1901. Finally he was able to return to North Africa and pursue his true vocation. After a few years in northern Algeria, he settled permanently in the remote village of Tamanrasset in the central Sahara. His goal was simply to be a friend, neighbor, and brother to his Muslim neighbors, who indeed honored him with the title *Marabout* (holy man). His form of dress, his diet, and his daily labor were the same as theirs. At the same time he kept an intense daily schedule of prayer, often spending the entire night in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. He always hoped and prayed that others would join him in this way of life, but no one came. In December, 1916, he was killed in his hermitage by a band of Muslim rebels. It was a kind of fulfillment for him, for he had always prayed that he might die as a martyr. Twenty years later, two congregations – the Little Brothers of Jesus and the Little Sisters of Jesus – were founded with the intent of following in the path that he had forged.

Foucauld's entire spirituality was the imitation and adoration of Jesus, whom he found in his neighbor – especially the most abandoned and maligned – as well as in the sacramental presence and in the depths of his own soul. Near the end of his life, he is reported to have said:

> Our entire existence, our whole being must shout the Gospel from the rooftops. Our entire person must breathe Jesus, all our actions. Our whole life must cry out that we belong to Jesus, reflect a Gospel way of living. Our whole being must be a living proclamation, a reflection of Jesus. (Foucauld)

The testimony of his life is that he was indeed thus transformed.

Alan (Bede) Griffiths (1906–1993) was born into a British Anglican family. As a teenager he was agnostic but was drawn to a kind of nature mysticism. At Oxford his tutor was C. S. Lewis, who influenced him to rediscover Christian faith. In 1933 he joined the Roman Catholic church, entered the Benedictine Abbey of Prinknash, and took the religious name of Bede. Twenty-two years later he was invited to India to help establish a Benedictine monastery in Bangalore. This monastery did not survive, but in 1968 Griffiths was invited to become the prior at the Saccidananda Monastery in Shantivanam, Tamil Nadu. This monastery had been founded by two other westerners, Jules

Monchanin and Henri le Saux in 1938. Le Saux had taken the name Swami Abhishik-tananda and immersed himself fully in Hindu Advaitic practice. Totally committed to both Christianity and Advaita, Abhishiktananda longed to reconcile them, but instead often felt torn between the two and conveyed this unease to others. With Bede Griffiths at its head, the monastery entered a period of peace in which its style of life was completely Indian at the same time that its faith was completely Christian. Over the next twenty years Griffiths was able to work out an intellectual synthesis of Advaita and Christian faith, based primarily in the insight that the Christian Trinity unites the non-dual Advaitic experience and the relational Christian experience.

Throughout all these years, Griffiths' leadership, teaching, and writing were based in his profound inner experience. In 1990, however, this experience reached a new level after he had a stroke. One of his disciples, Wayne Teasdale, described Griffiths' condition after this as "a strange state of consciousness transcendent to this realm of ordinary consciousness" (Teasdale 17). Two more strokes in 1992 and 1993 left him almost in the condition of a baby, although still able to speak. Of this period, two other disciples wrote:

> His words and teachings are very simple and straight from the heart – devoid of all theology and intellectual prisms. His speech is full of love and his eyes shine with an inner light whenever he says anything. His face, although wizened and pale, nevertheless reflects that glory which comes from communion with God. He only speaks of love. Love seems to be the central experience of his consciousness and it is all that comes through whether he sleeps or wakes. (Teasdale 23)

Nicholas Black Elk (1865–1950) was a Native American of the Oglala Lakota Sioux tribe. From time to time as a small boy he saw visions and heard sacred voices calling him. When he was nine he fell ill and appeared to be in a coma for twelve days, during which he experienced an elaborate vision filled with Lakota symbolism. As a young adult he became a medicine man and toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In 1890, while participating in the Ghost Dance movement, he had another major vision that he later recounted as including images of a man sharing many characteristics of the crucified Christ. In 1904 he was baptized as a Roman Catholic and subsequently became one of the leading Native catechists of his region. He was gifted in being able to tell stories that combined Lakota and Christian symbolism. In 1931, the poet John Niehardt conducted lengthy interviews and published *Black Elk Speaks,* which is an account of the holy man's boyhood and youth. This book has become a classic source for studies of Native American spirituality. In it, however, there is no mention of Black Elk's conversion to Christianity.[1] In reality, he continued as a Catholic catechist for the rest of his days, at the same time that he was also deeply committed to practicing and preserving the ancient Lakota rituals.

The majority of Black Elk's visionary experiences seem to have preceded his conversion to Christianity. Yet for the rest of his life he drew upon these visions, especially the Ghost Dance vision, not only in his sense of missionary vocation but also in his Lakota-Christian wisdom teaching. Recent scholarship has shown that the account of his great childhood vision that he gave Neihardt in 1931 was actually an interweaving

of Lakota symbols with those from a Jesuit catechetical tool called "The Two Roads Map" that Black Elk had used extensively in his catechetical work (Steltenkamp 115–127). In producing *Black Elk Speaks*, Neihardt omitted comments that Black Elk had made linking Christian scripture and symbolism with the imagery of his visions. For example, in the Ghost dance vision Black Elk was led by twelve men to the center of a circle where he saw a "holy tree all full of leaves and blooming," and against it "a man standing with arms held wide in front of him." This man said, "My life is such that all earthly beings and growing things belong to me. Your father, the Great Spirit, has said this. You too must say this." (Black Elk 249) Neihardt's field notes reveal that he omitted Black Elk's further comment that the man seemed to have wounds in his hands – a statement that would have made the parallels with the crucified Christ hard to miss.

Sundar Singh (1889–1929) was born in a pious Sikh family in Punjab, India, and was well educated in the Sikh and Hindu religious traditions. As a boy he attended a Presbyterian mission school but firmly rejected the religion of the colonialists. When he was about fourteen, in the midst of a period of restless search, he experienced a dramatic vision of Jesus that filled him with profound peace. After he was baptized in 1905, his family cast him out when they realized that he would not renounce his conversion. He put on the saffron robes of a *sadhu* or wandering monk and spent the rest of his life traveling about to live and preach his Christian faith.

After 1918 Singh began to travel abroad, often speaking to large audiences in other parts of Asia and in Europe. Controversy developed, however, over the question of whether all the adventures that he recounted, such as travels on foot into Tibet, the discovery there of a hidden sect of Christian *sannyasis* (ascetics) who included a 365-year-old *Maharishi*, numerous beatings and imprisonments, etc., actually happened (Sharpe 161–167). Near the end of his life, in search of someone who could understand the nature and importance of his ongoing visions, he developed a "spirit relationship" with the long-dead Emmanuel Swedenborg. In 1929 he told his friends he was going to Tibet and disappeared, presumably dying somewhere along the road.

Despite the questions raised about some of his stories, there seems to be little question that he was a fervent Christian whose witness and message had a profound impact on Christianity in India. Although his own spirituality was formed by his frequent visions, he taught others through stories and maxims that were engaging and practical. He continued to have the highest respect for the non-Christian religions and to practice some aspects of Yoga. In his teaching, he frequently drew upon the language and stories of the Vedic traditions that he had learned as a child. He rejected, however, the Advaitic ideal of absorption into the divine, asserting instead that even in mystical union we remain distinct from God. He wrote:

> A sponge lies in the water and the water fills the sponge, but the water is not the sponge and the sponge is not the water. It is the same when I immerse myself in God. God fills my heart and I am in complete union with God, but I am not God and God is not I. We are distinct though not separate. (Singh 65)

These interfaith boundary crossers represent a very important stream in the mysticism of the twentieth century (Feldmeier). Working at the most intimate level, often with great personal suffering, they opened paths by which the world's great religious traditions can grow in mutual love, respect, and harmony.

Advocates for the Reign of God

One of the characteristics of twentieth-century theology has been a strong shift toward emphasis on the immanence of God within human social and political relations. In this view, love of God entails participation in God's work of creating societies that are just and humanizing. Many Christians, however, still labored under the weight of centuries of spiritual teaching that had emphasized separation from the world as the royal road to holiness. Sometimes the mystical path and the path of advocacy for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation have been regarded as incompatible, and proponents of one have felt a need to disparage the other. A few individuals, though, have experienced a call to live both to the full (Rakoczy).

In this category I have only included two profiles. One reason is because of space limitations. A more significant reason, however, is that persons in this category often present themselves to others more in terms of their public role than in the intimacy of their mystical experience. Thus, whether it is accurate to call them "mystics" can be difficult to assess. The friends and colleagues of Dag Hammarskjöld, for example, were shocked to learn of the intensity of his inner life. If his journal had not been found and published, the secret of his mysticism would have died with him. Others who might be considered for this category include Julius Nyerere, Dorothy Day, Desmond Tutu, and Pedro Casaldáliga.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) was a brilliant Swedish economist and civil servant from a Lutheran family. In April 1953, he was elected as Secretary General of the United Nations. He spent the next eight years negotiating international crises in China, Egypt, Lebanon, Cambodia, and the Congo. He died in 1961 in a suspicious plane crash while on the Congo mission. After his death, a journal that he had kept since his college days was found by his bedside. He had given it the title *Wägmärken*, literally "Way Markers" (later translated into English as *Markings*). This journal traces his long and painful journey from doubt, loneliness, and near-despair to a Christian faith rooted in deep stillness and humility. It reveals that during his years of leadership in the United Nations, he understood his life and his potential death on the model of Jesus' complete sacrificial surrender to his mission of service to others.

Hammarskjöld's darkest year seems to have been 1952. He struggled mightily with disgust at the emptiness of his own and others' scramble for recognition and success. In his fatigue, suicide was a temptation. Yet already something else was being born. He wrote:

> Through me there flashes this vision of a magnetic field in the soul, created in a timeless present by unknown multitudes, living in holy obedience, whose words and actions are a timeless prayer . . . "The Communion of Saints" – and – within it – an eternal life. (Hammarskjöld 84)

As 1953 opened, the whole mood of his writing changed. He quoted John of the Cross: "Faith is the marriage of God and the Soul." From then on he frequently quoted or paraphrased medieval mystics, especially Meister Eckhart (see Chapter 23, this volume). Two years later, he could write:

> The "mystical experience." Always *here* and *now* – in that freedom which is one with distance, in that stillness which is born of silence. But – this is a freedom in the midst of action, a stillness in the midst of other human beings. The mystery is a constant reality to him who, in this world, is free from self-concern, a reality that grows peaceful and mature before the receptive attention of assent.
>
> In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action. (Hammarskjöld 122)

Dag Hammarskjöld is a remarkable example of a man of action who found "the point of rest at the center of our being" (Hammarskjöld 174) from which he was able to act selflessly in service to the community of nations.

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was an African-American born in the segregated U.S. South. From early childhood his community remarked that the boy had a gift of "second sight." Overcoming many obstacles, he went on to earn a divinity degree from Rochester Theological Seminary and to do post-graduate studies in philosophy at both Oberlin and Haverford. He married, had two daughters, was ordained a Baptist minister, and became a university professor. Even as a young man, his sermons, lectures, and writings were widely admired for his ability to make links between his own social reality as an African-American and broader truths that spoke to people around the nation and world. During a pilgrimage in Asia in 1935, he and his wife met with Gandhi. Afterward he stood at Khyber Pass and committed his life to ending the scandal of segregation in the churches. This is why in 1944, at the peak of his career, he left academia to help found the Fellowship Church, one of the first interracial churches in the United States. The best known of his twenty books, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, written in 1949, is still read as an inspiring expression of early liberation theology.

Thurman wrote this about his own mystical quest:

> The cruel vicissitudes of the social situation in which I have been forced to live in American Society have made it vital for me to seek resources, or a resource, to which I could have access as I sought means for sustaining the personal enterprise of my life beyond all the ravages inflicted upon it by the brutalities of the social order. To live under siege, with the equilibrium and tranquility of peace, to prevent the springs of my being from being polluted by the bitter fruit of the climate of violence, to hold and re-hold the moral initiative of my own action and to seek the experience of community, all of this to whatever extent it has been possible to achieve it, is to walk through a door that no man can shut. (Thurman 5)

Stillness at the center, enabling the person to receive God's absolute love and therefore to love others selflessly regardless of the circumstances: these are the key themes of Howard Thurman's mysticism. It was a major formative influence on many leaders

of the civil rights movement in the United States, including Martin Luther King Jr., James Farmer, and Vernon Jordan.

It is fitting to end this essay with this glance at the thought of Howard Thurman, who had a unique gift for articulating a view of mysticism as integrated into the full fabric of human communal life. The twentieth century was a period of massive suffering, of leaps and bounds in human insight, of vast cross-fertilization of cultures. As we have seen, mystics were (and continue to be) profoundly involved in all these movements. Yet the most significant development of all may be the conviction that mysticism – that is, life radically centered in God – can find its way into the daily realities of family life, work, and political processes. This is a central challenge handed on from the mystics of the twentieth century to those who may be called to take up this vocation in the twenty-first century.

Note

1 Steltenkamp examined John Neihardt's field notes and found that, in 1931, Black Elk made clear allusions to Christian symbolism in recounting his 1890 Ghost Dance vision. By the time of Neihardt's interview, of course, some thirty-six years had passed since the vision. It is possible that Black Elk's memory "evolved" through the processes of reflection and repeated oral retelling of the vision in Christian settings.

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Critical Perspectives on Mysticism

CHAPTER 35

A Critical Theological Perspective

Philip Sheldrake

The legitimacy of the term "mysticism" has frequently been questioned in Christian theological circles. The French Jesuit Michel de Certeau (1925–1986), one of the leading twentieth-century theorists of Christian mysticism, can more or less be credited with establishing that "mysticism" (*la mystique*) originated as a distinct category associated with subjective religious experiences in early seventeenth-century France (de Certeau 1964). Although de Certeau admitted that the remote origins of "mysticism" in this subjective sense lay earlier in the Middle Ages, he believed that the key point in its formalization was between the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century (de Certeau 1995: 83).

Until relatively recently, most writings have concentrated on mysticism as a category of religious *experience*. This approach results in several problems. First, it tends to separate mysticism from theology – the ways we attempt to think or speak about God. Second, it removes mysticism into the realm of private, individual, interiority. The result is that it is difficult to know how mysticism could be important either to society or to the wider church. Third, it tends to concentrate on phenomena, states of mind or emotions experienced by a limited number of people as the result of intense meditative practice or ascetical discipline. This effectively separates mysticism from the Christian life in general.

Yet, as Bernard McGinn suggests, while mysticism involves what he calls "an immediate consciousness of the presence of God," the Christian mystics do not believe in or set out to practice "mysticism." Rather, they believe in and practice the Christian way of life albeit with particular intensity (McGinn 1992: xiii–xx). Denys Turner, in his philosophical-theological study of Christian mysticism, also notes that what concerns the great mystical writers is the Christian life rather than altered states of consciousness (see Turner passim). Importantly, in Christianity the mystics are as concerned with language as with experience. That is to say, the mystical dimension of Christianity

subverts all conventional theological definitions of God. The great medieval Dominican, Meister Eckhart, loved to cite or paraphrase Augustine on speaking about God: "If I have spoken of it, I have not spoken, for it is ineffable" (Eckhart, Sermon 9 in McGinn 1986: 255–261).

This essay focuses specifically on the relationship between mysticism and theology. First, I will briefly examine the long historical tradition of what was called "mystical theology" from its patristic origins through its predominantly western developments up to the Second Vatican Council. Second, I will look at a number of key twentieth-century theological appraisals of the notion of mysticism, both positive and critical. Finally, I will suggest why mysticism is critically important as a subversive discourse to the overall theological enterprise.

Patristic Origins of Mystical Theology

While the noun "mysticism" is relatively modern, the use of the adjective "mystical" to describe a form of Christian theology is more ancient (Bouyer passim). The Greek adjective *mystikos* with its implications of silence or the unseen was used by ancient writers in reference to the mystery cults, but by the second century CE, beginning with Clement of Alexandria, the word began to be adapted by Christians to signify the hidden realities of the Christian life. It was primarily employed in relation to the deeper spiritual meanings of the Bible, but it was also used to point to the inner power of Christian rituals and sacraments. Then, in the third century, a biblical scholar who was also a catechist, Origen (d. 254), developed a biblically based theological programme for the ways Christians were to be purified from sin and, especially through a spiritual approach to reading and interpreting scripture, were to be lifted up to the point where they were not merely immersed in a love for God but were united to the God who *is* love (Origen, ed. Greer).

In the west, what became known as mystical theology began as part of an undifferentiated reflection on Christian sources and their application. Early theologians did not write about "mystical theology" as a distinct subject area because the very heart of theology was mystical. From the patristic period until the development of the "new theology" of scholasticism around the twelfth century theology was a single enterprise (see Sheldrake 36–49; Megyer 55–67). The unity of theology implied that intellectual reflection, prayer and the Christian life were to be a seamless whole. Patristic theology involved a constant reading of scripture which was related to liturgy and was in critical dialogue with Greek philosophical culture. This process issued in reflection on such central themes as prayer, martyrdom, the state and stages of the Christian life and so on. A variety of genres provided the medium for such theology: sermons, letters, lives of saints, and monastic rules.

To be a theologian originally meant that a person had contemplated the mystery of the incarnation and possessed an experience of faith on which to reflect. Theology was always more than an intellectual exercise. Knowledge of divine things was inseparable from the love of God deepened in prayer. For Augustine (*De Trinitate*, Books XII–XIV), God is known not by *scientia* but by *sapientia* – that is to say, not by rational analysis but a contemplative-mystical knowledge through love and desire.

The unifying feature was the Bible, and the Patristic approach to scripture ultimately developed, in the west, into a medieval theory of exegesis (Schneiders 1–20). Thus, theology was a process, on different levels, of absorbing scripture into the bloodstream with the aim of deepening the Christian life. This approach encompassed a synthesis of exegesis, speculative reasoning and mystical contemplation. Christian doctrine arose from this biblical base and attempted to provide a language to express an essentially mystical apprehension of God revealed in Christ and as the Spirit within every Christian.

Patristic "mystical theology" is not to be confused with the later western interest in subjective religious experiences or in detailed itineraries for the spiritual journey. The "mystical" was fundamentally the life of every baptized Christian who entered ever more fully into the "mystery" of God revealed in Jesus Christ by belonging to the "fellowship of the mystery," that is, the church where they were exposed to and responded to the scriptures, the liturgy and the sacraments.

Around the beginning of the sixth century this approach fused with Neoplatonic elements in the writings of an anonymous Syrian monk who used the pseudonym Dionysius (after St. Paul's convert, Acts 17:34). Pseudo-Dionysius, as he became known, used the term "mystical theology" to indicate the kind of knowledge that engaged with the unknown God. Pseudo-Dionysius was also among the first to use the term "mystical union" (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* in Luidheid and Rorem 1987). Although to a degree he pointed forwards to later medieval developments in a specifically mystical theology, pseudo-Dionysius fundamentally summed up patristic understandings of theology (Pelikan ch. 4; Louth 1981: ch. 8; Louth 1989: passim; Turner ch. 2).

In pseudo-Dionysius' approach to God, knowing and unknowing, apophatic and kataphatic theologies, are mutually related rather than mutually exclusive. The whole of creation is brought into being by God to show forth divine glory. The cosmos is to be viewed positively as the self-revelation of God's goodness. "Good" is, therefore, the first affirmation (or image) of God discussed by pseudo-Dionysius. Again, in his theology the Trinity is first realized in terms of distinctions between the persons whereby we can know something of God. However, underlying these distinctions is a unity or synthesis that we cannot ultimately comprehend. Therefore, the theology of the Trinity is a way of knowing because it seeks to affirm something about God. Yet, at the same time, it is a way of unknowing because the affirmations we make immediately push us beyond what we can grasp. Paradoxically, the doctrine of the Trinity both reveals God and yet reveals God as beyond knowledge. Through our relationship with God as revealed in creation, and in the midst of our affirmations, we come to realize that God never becomes our possession or an object of rational knowledge.

Medieval Mystical Theologies

The recovery of interest in the mystical theology of pseudo-Dionysius in the west during the high Middle Ages became associated with a new attention to affective experience which eventually gave birth to a new genre of mystical literature. This process had

several sources, including an aesthetic and romantic sensibility born of what became known as "the twelfth-century Renaissance." The theme of love, secular and religious, was cultivated to a heightened degree. There was also an increased awareness of the inner human landscape even if not precisely of the modern idea of the individual "self." These shifts of consciousness encouraged an interest in spiritual guidance which in turn generated treatises by spiritual directors for those under their care. The interest in subjective experience combined with the "scientific" theology of the schools in the writings of two monks of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris in the first half of the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor and Richard of St. Victor. These contributed to the development of a distinctive western mystical theology (Bynum 82–109).

Richard of St. Victor, especially, had an extensive influence on spiritual writings throughout the Middle Ages. Yet he was profoundly theological. At the heart of his mystical teaching lay the Trinity. Inspired by Augustine, Richard emphasized that love was the center of relations within God. For him, the perfection of love demanded not only the mutual love of two persons but a third person with whom this joy of mutual loving can be shared (*De Trinitate* 3.19). In the image of God-as-Trinity, human love is essentially self-transcending. This is brought about particularly by the action of God's Spirit within the human spirit (*De Trinitate* 6.14). Love, therefore, is at the heart of the Christian life and is more than merely a source of personal fulfilment.

Parallel to the mystical theology of the Victorines, it is difficult to be precise about the date when the more rational-scientific strand of western theology was born. However, from approximately 1100 onwards, scholars such as Peter Abelard (1079–1142) began to understand theology rather differently as a process of intellectual speculation. In the construction of the new theology, philosophical categories (especially those of Aristotle) began to rival biblical ones. The "new" theologians treated scripture and patristic writings in a more propositional way. Not surprisingly there were serious conflicts between those who espoused this new approach to theology and those who continued to oppose it (Leclercq 68–87). During the twelfth century, the centers of theological inquiry increasingly moved from the monasteries to new cathedral schools that gave birth to the first European universities. This involved an intellectual shift in that theology became dissociated from an ascetic-contemplative way of life. The new scholarship existed primarily to foster teaching and learning and to cultivate the discipline of the mind.

It is true that the greatest figures of the theology of the new schools (scholasticism) such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure (for example his classic *De triplici via*, composed in the mid-thirteenth century) still sought to unite theological reflection with contemplation. Yet the new theological method with its more "scientific" approach led to a slow but sure separation of spiritual-mystical theory from the hard core of theology. This was a tragedy for both. Secular reason has traditionally been considered the child of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. However, its intellectual origins lie in these medieval theological developments where "knowledge" came to be understood as a mastery of facts rather than attention to a contemplative-mystical vision of truth.

The word most frequently used to describe the heart of Christian mysticism both by mystical writers and theological commentators is "union." However, in a more fundamental theological sense, union with God is the underlying precondition of the human

spiritual journey rather than simply the final stage. In addition, mystical union has sometimes been characterized in terms of passivity and of absorption into the divine whereby individual identity is lost. There are obvious difficulties in relating this notion to properly theological understandings of how God relates to human beings in freedom and love. However, we cannot bypass entirely the ambiguity of some mystical language, particularly in the fourteenth-century Rhineland mystical theologian, the Dominican Meister Eckhart. In his paradoxical and intentionally contradictory vernacular sermons, he appears to make daring assertions of mystical identity between human beings and God. This led to suspicions of heresy and the condemnation of some of his teachings. However, at the same time Eckhart preached the absolute abyss separating us from the mysterious transcendent God and the necessary negation of all human concepts of "God" in order to touch the divine "ground" (*grunt*) itself, what may be thought of as the God beyond our images or concepts of "God" (for relevant selections of Eckhart, see McGinn and Colledge; McGinn 1986) (see Chapters 6 and 23, this volume).

Meister Eckhart has sometimes been considered scarcely Christian because of his apparent lack of conventional Trinitarian and Christological language. Certainly overall, Eckhart is cautious about using conceptual God language and the oneness of God receives by far his greatest attention. Yet, Trinitarian theology does appear in his works. Interestingly in his *Commentary on John's Gospel* (McGinn and Colledge 122– 173) Eckhart seems to come closer to the Greek theory of emanation than to the traditional western theology of Augustine. Eckhart describes the Father as the "Beginning" or "Principle" of the Godhead from which all else flows (124). It is not clear whether this implies that the Trinity is merely part of a divine emanation ("God") rather than an intrinsic part of God ("Godhead"). In the same passage he clearly links the divine reality or essence (immanence) with the activity of creation (economy). Elsewhere in the *Commentary* (123) Eckhart follows Augustine (*De Trinitate* 14.19.25) in considering that humanity is made in the image of the whole Trinity. In his "Commentary on Exodus" and "Commentary on Wisdom" it is clear that the persons of the Trinity are within the One from all eternity and that we cannot separate God's works from God's essence (McGinn 1986: 153, 97–98).

One of the greatest of western Trinitarian theologians, the fourteenth-century Flemish priest John Ruusbroec, is also one of the great mystical theologians of the Middle Ages. In many respects, he was closer to the Augustinian tradition, mediated through Richard of St. Victor, than to his near contemporary Meister Eckhart. His mystical theology was consistently Trinitarian as he did not differentiate between oneness in the depths of God and the communion of divine persons. In the highest part of the human soul lies the *imago Trinitatis*. Although he understood the Christian life as having three stages, Ruusbroec does not describe the highest stage (contemplative union with God "without distinction") with the starkness of Eckhart. Although ultimately God transcends all concepts, the Godhead nevertheless includes the Trinity of persons:

> [God] subsists blissfully in eternal rest in accordance with the essential Unity of his being and also subsists actively in eternal activity in accordance with the Trinity. Each of these is the perfection of the other, for rest abides in the Unity and activity abides in the

> Trinity, and the two remain thus for all eternity. (*The Spiritual Espousals* Book 1, Part 4 in Wiseman 128)

Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1417/20) is both one of the greatest English theologians and the most original of the so-called English Mystics of the fourteenth century. We know little about Julian – even her name is taken from the dedication of the Norwich church where she became a solitary (or anchoress). This happened sometime after an almost mortal illness in 1373 when, over a twenty-four hour period, she had sixteen visions provoked by the sight of a crucifix in her sick room. Her *Showings* (or *Revelations of Divine Love*) are available in a Short Text and the more famous Long Text, a sophisticated but not systematic work of mystical-pastoral theology written after twenty years of contemplative reflection. The overall teaching is addressed to all her fellow Christians and expresses in rich Trinitarian terms a theology of the irrevocability of God's love in whom there is no blame. The sinfulness and suffering of humankind is transformed by the re-creative work of Jesus our Mother into ultimate endless bliss. In Julian's words, despite the present pain of human existence, "all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well" (see Julian of Norwich, in Colledge and Walsh).

By the fifteenth century there were few significant thinkers who stood out against the separation of academic theology and mystical theology. Two exceptions were Jean Gerson and Nicholas of Cusa. Gerson was a diocesan priest and Chancellor of the University of Paris from 1395 to 1418. He continued to draw upon the Patristic tradition (especially Dionysius) and the monastic theology of the Victorines, Bernard and Bonaventure. In this context, Gerson's three most significant works were *De mystica theologia speculativa, De mystica theologia practica* and *De vita spirituali*. During the Council of Constance in 1415 Gerson also wrote *De probatione spirituum*. The book provided a theological framework for analysis and judgment concerning the validity of mystical visions (see Haas 169–171). Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) was one of the most original thinkers of the fifteenth century. Like Gerson he became a priest who was both a major figure in the conciliar movement and later an ecclesiastical reformer, papal legate and bishop. Again like Gerson, Nicholas of Cusa was strongly influenced by the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius as well as medieval mystical theologians such as Bonaventure and Eckhart. Intellectually he crossed the boundaries between theology, philosophy, mathematics, and political theory. His major writings have only recently become available in English (see Nicholas of Cusa in Bond) (see Chapter 26, this volume).

In summary, the high Middle Ages in the west were characterized by growing divisions within theology and the gradual separation of mysticism from theology. This division went deeper than method or content. It was, at heart, a division between the affective side of faith (or participation) and conceptual knowledge. By the end of the Middle Ages, the "spiritual life" had increasingly moved to the margins of theology.

Mystical Theology Since the Reformation

By the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century the relationship between mystical theology and theology more broadly was at best ambiguous and at worst antago-

nistic. The divisions in western Christianity after the Reformation encouraged theology to concentrate on doctrines in order to become the guardian of the prevailing orthodoxy, Catholic or Protestant. Equally, much mainstream Protestantism tended to be suspicious of a turn inwards to the human heart, deemed to be corrupted by sin and selfishness. Mysticism and contemplation also appeared to claim that through practice, through effort, one could reach union with God. In contrast, *the* fundamental mark of Reformation theology was the principle of divine monergism – that God alone initiates and accomplishes everything in the work of salvation. The churches of the Reformation, therefore, with few exceptions, became somewhat suspicious of the subjectivities of "mysticism" or "the spiritual life." There were, in fact, Protestant mystical writers who produced works of spiritual guidance or meditation. Among English Protestants (not least Puritans such as Isaac Ambrose, see Schwanda passim) and Lutheran Pietists there was a vocabulary of "piety," "Godliness," "holiness of life," and "devout life." A genre of devotional literature developed to correspond to this.

The period of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the growth of the belief in empirical and scientific inquiry as the privileged way to truth and certainty. This further aggravated the split between theology and the Christian life. Theology tended to espouse an intellectual positivism in order to emphasize that it too was a "scientific" discipline. That is to say, faith was increasingly expressed in propositional and conceptual terms. The value of abstract intelligence was overestimated. Consequently the experiential dimension of human life was to be questioned continuously throughout an analytical journey towards what could be proved. The notion that theology was a science became linked to the belief that such scientific inquiry could generate value-free knowledge.

As a consequence during the next hundred and fifty years a vocabulary of Christian life and prayer developed in isolation from theological doctrine, particularly in Roman Catholic circles. However, the work of one figure, the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Scaramelli (1687–1752), demands brief attention. It seems that Scaramelli, with his *Direttorio ascetico* (1752) and *Direttorio mistico* (1754), was the first person to establish the titles of "ascetical theology" and "mystical theology" in a way that became common in Roman Catholic circles, especially seminaries and religious communities. His books became classics for some two hundred years. Notably, the process of the spiritual life was conceived in two stages. Ascetical theology dealt with the initial stages of the Christian life, based on disciplined practices, and applied to the majority. Mystical theology analyzed the more advanced stages of the spiritual life up to mystical union and applied only to a minority. Apart from encouraging a detailed, detached and even forensic approach to mysticism, this specialist vocabulary further encouraged the isolation of mystical or spiritual theology from the remainder of theology.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the revival of a purer form of Thomism after centuries of second-rate neo-scholasticism encouraged a degree of re-engagement between the subject matter of mysticism and wider theology. The works of A. A. Tanquerey and R. Garrigou-Lagrange became the handbooks of ascetical and mystical theology in Roman Catholic seminaries and theology faculties until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Attempts were made in Anglican circles in the 1930s to produce something comparable such as *The Elements of the Spiritual Life* by F. P. Harton.

Broadly speaking, in the period after Vatican II, the term "mystical theology," like "ascetical theology" its junior partner, gave way to "spiritual theology" and then more recently to the multidisciplinary, more inclusive, and less hierarchical field of "Christian spirituality." A notable exception is the excellent book by the Anglican theologian Mark McIntosh which, while contemporary in its approaches both to theology and to spirituality, continues to use the term "mystical theology" (McIntosh).

As a brief and inadequate footnote, it is important to understand that what has been described is very much the western approach. The eastern Christian theological tradition did not suffer the separation between intellectual theology and spirituality or mysticism that became characteristic in the west. In other words, when eastern Christianity uses the phrase "mystical theology" it continues to follow broadly the ancient patristic approach. This closely relates experience of God and the Christian moral life with doctrine. Because the culture of individualism and an interest in subjective spiritual experience remained relatively undeveloped in the east, there are very few biographical accounts of the interior or mystical life in comparison to western texts. One classic treatment of eastern mystical theology in modern times is that by Vladimir Lossky (Lossky; Meyendorff). Lossky defines mystical theology as a spirituality that expresses a doctrinal attitude. This underlines that all theology is "mystical" in the sense that it is focused firmly on showing forth the divine mystery. Theology is neither abstract-conceptual nor deductive because true *theologia* is inseparable from *theoria,* that is, contemplation. True theologians are therefore those who see and experience the content of their theology and the authenticity of whose vision corresponded to the witness of scripture and tradition.

Modern Theological Appraisals

In the course of the twentieth century, "mysticism" received rather more significant attention both positively and critically from mainstream Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians (see McGinn 1992: Appendix 266–291). In the Catholic tradition, one of the most significant figures was the German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–1984). Two elements stand out. First, he made acceptable the language of "openness to mystery" and "self-transcendence." Rather than starting with God in the abstract, Rahner began his theological inquiry with shared human experience. Simply by being human we are fundamentally oriented towards mystery. This "mystery" is God in whom we originate, with whom we live and towards whom we are drawn in a continual movement of self-transcendence. Despite this, at a more fundamental level Rahner understood that God is always the starting point. It is God's free self-communication (grace) that actually constitutes the capacity for transcendence within each of us.

Second, because Rahner's approach to self-transcendence applies to every human without exception, he offers a balanced theological reading of mysticism. Rahner rejects any dichotomy between "extraordinary" and "ordinary" religious experience. By stressing both the mystery of God and an incarnational vision, Rahner united the *via negativa* with the *via positiva* in his theological language (Rahner 1966: 3–22; 1984: passim). Equally, Rahner questioned the concept of distinct, successive stages in the

spiritual journey, based on a Neoplatonic anthropology derived from Origen and which promoted detachment from all human passion. He also rejected anything that suggests a continual and inevitable increase of grace or the association of higher moral acts with one stage of the spiritual life (for example, the mystical) rather than another (Rahner 1967).

The later Karl Rahner remarked on the vital importance of the mystical dimension of faith for example in his famous aphorism not long before he died that Christians of the future will have to be mystics or be nothing at all. In his final work, Rahner confronted the incomprehensibility of God in a more explicit way than previously. We find an increasing scepticism about both institutional and intellectual pretensions to certainty. By the late 1970s Rahner was prepared to describe God's Spirit as ranging far more widely than the institutional church.

> If and insofar as the experience of the Spirit I talk of here is also to be found in a mysticism of everyday life outside a verbalized and institutionalized Christianity, and therefore may be discovered by Christians in their lives when they encounter their non-Christian brothers and sisters . . . Christians need not be shocked or astonished at such a revelation. It should serve only to show that their God, the God of Jesus Christ, wants *all* men and women to be saved, and offers God's grace as liberation to *all* human beings, offering it as liberation into incomprehensible mystery. Then the grace of Christ takes effect in a mysterious way beyond the bounds of verbalized and institutionalized Christendom. (Extract in Kelly 233–234)

By contrast, one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968), was deeply suspicious of the connection between Christianity and mysticism. Barth's views, as expressed at various places in his massive but incomplete thirteen-volume *Church Dogmatics*, have often been taken as symptomatic of Protestant theology overall although other late nineteenth- or twentieth-century Protestant theologians such as Albert Schweitzer and Paul Tillich, not to mention the less widely known Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) in his *Reformed Dogmatics,* were more open to the theological acceptability of mysticism in Christianity. Indeed, some recent research on mystical writing in the historic Reformed tradition has noted the differences between Bavinck's and Barth's theologies in their evaluations of "mysticism" (see Schwanda ch. 6).

In summary, Barth's concerns focused on the preoccupation with experience and affectivity which he presumed was characteristic of mystical piety. Much of his problem was actually a reaction against an increasing subjectivity that he detected in nineteenth-century Protestant writings. However, Barth himself uses the language of "union." Thus he defines the *unio mystica* as "the presence of grace in which God can give Himself to each individual, or assume the individual into unity of life with Himself, in the Christian experience and relationship" (Barth IV/2: 55). Later in the same volume Barth indeed declares that union with Christ is what makes us Christian. Yet in this union each person retains their independence, uniqueness and activity (Barth IV/2: 540). Barth was also clear that union with Christ is not to be understood as the final climactic stage of Christian development but is the precondition of being Christian at

all (Barth IV/3: 548). Barth feared that the tendency to emphasize subjectivity placed humans at the center of a process of development. The result of this would be that human experience, technique and effort would replace Jesus Christ as the unequivocal sovereign Lord (Barth I/2: 263 and III/4: 59). Barth rejected the contemplative language of self-surrender and absorption (Barth I/2: 261). Equally, the positive and affirmative language of scripture made him suspicious of the language of negative, apophatic theology (Barth II/1: 193–194).

Liberation, Political, and Feminist Theologies

A number of social and political theologians since the 1980s have also reflected on the mystical way. The Chilean Segundo Galilea has written more than anyone in the liberationist tradition concerning the mystical dimension of responses to injustice. Galilea suggests that there needs to be a movement from the notion that a political response is purely ethical or structural towards the truly spiritual experience of discovering the compassion of God incarnate in the poor. Humans are not able to find true compassion, or create structures of deep transformation, without entering into Jesus' own compassion. Only contemplative-mystical practice, within a context of social action, is capable of bringing about the change of heart necessary for a lasting solidarity – particularly one that embraces the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Thus, according to Galilea, exterior social engagement must be accompanied by a process of interior transformation and liberation from self-seeking. This is the heart of what he terms "integral liberation" (Galilea 1985: 186–194). However, not all forms of mysticism are helpful in this regard. Galilea is profoundly critical of a certain type of Neoplatonic mysticism.

> It has . . . a strongly transcendent orientation and neglects bodily, historical, temporal mediations. It tends to make of contemplation an ascent to God in which the temporal sphere is gradually left behind until an exclusive absorption in God is reached. This tendency can easily become a form of escape. (Galilea 1981: 531)

He calls for a reformulation of the idea of the mystical. At the heart of the tradition is self-forgetfulness rather than a preoccupation with personal interiority. The teachings of the great mystics have always been related to the classic Christian theme of the Cross.

> This implies the crucifixion of egoism and the purification of the self as a condition of contemplation. This crucifixion of egoism in forgetfulness of self in the dialectic prayer-commitment will be brought to fulfilment both in the mystical dimension of communication with Jesus in the luminous night of faith, and also in the sacrifice which is assumed by commitment to the liberation of others. The "death" of mysticism and the "death" of the militant are the two dimensions of the call to accept the cross, as the condition of being a disciple. The desert as a political experience liberates [the Christian] from egoism and from the "system," and is a source of freedom and of an ability to liberate. (Galilea 1981: 535–536)

In the Protestant tradition of prophetic-critical theology, Jürgen Moltmann has written sympathetically of mysticism. In his short book *Experiences of God* he underlines the necessarily ethical dimension of the mystical *sapientia experimentalis* – experiential knowledge or participative wisdom. The most interesting aspect of his approach to mysticism is the delineation of a five-fold process to replace the more traditional *triplex via* or "three-fold way." This process is really a continuous circular movement. It begins with our human engagement with the ambiguities of the external world. The initial response to injustice, for example, is to act to change things. This action inevitably leads to a realization that a truly Christian response has to be supported by prayer and contemplation. Contemplation in Moltmann's biblically based theology is focused on the history of Jesus Christ in the gospels. This leads us to a movement away from self and from false images of God towards "God alone." Purified of selfishness, our encounter with the living God is what has been described classically in mystical theology as "union." However, this union does not become an end in itself. The purpose of mystical union is not to remain in some form of pure self-absorbed spiritual experience beyond our responsibilities in the everyday world. What we encounter at the heart of God is the Cross. Mystical union, therefore, leads to a deeper identification with the person of Jesus Christ who moved out of himself in kenotic, self-giving love. Thus, for Moltmann, the mystical journey leads the believer back from union with God, which now becomes a new point of departure, to a renewed and purified practice of everyday discipleship. This is the true meaning of ecstasy, *ekstasis*. It is to step outside oneself in self-giving love.

> As long as we do not think that dying with Christ spiritually is a substitute for dying with him in reality, mysticism does not mean estrangement from action; it is a preparation for public, political discipleship. (Moltmann 73)

Therefore in Moltmann the icon of mysticism becomes the political martyr as much as the contemplative monk. Thinking of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death under the Nazis, Moltmann writes:

> The place of mystical experience is in very truth the cell – the prison cell. The "witness to the truth of Christ" is despised, scoffed at, persecuted, dishonoured and rejected. In his own fate he experiences the fate of Christ. His fate conforms to Christ's fate. That is what the mystics called *conformitas crucis*, the conformity of the cross . . . Eckhart's remark that suffering is the shortest way to the birth of God in the soul applies, not to any imagined suffering, but to the very real sufferings endured by "the witness to the truth." (Moltmann 72)

Finally, the work of two writers, Dorothee Soelle and Grace Jantzen, offer particularly fruitful examples of an engagement with mysticism from the perspective of feminist theology. Dorothee Soelle, a German Protestant theologian who worked for many years in the United States, has been variously described as a feminist theologian, a liberation theologian, and a political theologian. However, she was not only inspired by the mystical traditions of Christianity and other religions, but also came to believe that her

commitment to political resistance and to changing the world must have mystical roots. She wrote an extensive work on the subject, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Sölle 2001a). Yet, in many ways her theological reflections on the mystical journey are presented more succinctly in her essay "To be amazed, to let go, to resist: Outline for a mystical journey today" (Sölle 2001b). Soelle writes of three dimensions to "mystical consciousness." First there is "amazement" which is not only wonder or praise of God but something that "tears the veil of triviality." "Without reinspiration, nothing new begins . . . We do not embark upon the path of our journey as seekers, but as people who have been found; we are preceded always by the goodness we have experienced" (Sölle 2001b: 46). On the second level, we leave ourselves or let go or experience "missing God" – a purification born of realizing "how distant we are from a true life in God" (Sölle 2001b, 47). This is a process of "dis-education" [her term] and freedom from "the addictive and compulsive mechanisms of consuming." Finally, the third level is "a living in God" – a *via unitiva* (Sölle 2001b: 48). This level involves a healing which is also the birth of true resistance.

Grace Jantzen engaged extensively with mysticism, both in the Christian tradition and beyond, but in her writings on gender and mysticism was also profoundly suspicious of defining a general phenomenon known as "mystical experience." However, she departed from the work of more "gender blind" commentators on mysticism such as Bernard McGinn by taking seriously and directly addressing the issue of mystical visions. As Jantzen notes, it would be unreasonable to reject male approaches to mysticism just because they are male. However, we can no longer ignore as unimportant a tendency for male theological analyses of mysticism to accord more value to reason and to language and to be suspicious of the sensory faculties commonly associated with the mysticism of women. It can be noted that, for Julian of Norwich (about whom Jantzen had written a major study) and other female mystics, visionary experiences not only endorsed the teaching authority of women but also had a teaching value in themselves That is to say that the imaginary world that the description of such visions conjured up offered access to a deeper level of understanding than was possible through a purely didactic style of theology (Jantzen ch. 5).

Conclusion: Mysticism as Theological Subversion

After looking at historical styles of mystical theology and then at some contemporary theological appraisals of mysticism, I want finally to explore briefly why mysticism is critically important to the overall theological enterprise. I will address this question under the heading of "theological subversion."

Human attempts to think about God seek a balance between imaging God and a recognition that God's reality is ultimately beyond images. The words "kataphatic" and "apophatic" have often been used to describe the two sides of human engagement with God. The kataphatic dimension emphasizes the way of images, concepts and naming. It is a positive theology based partly on a high doctrine of creation and human existence as contexts for God's self-revelation and partly on the capacity of human thought to engage with this. The apophatic dimension, in contrast, emphasizes "not knowing,"

silence, darkness, imagelessness and the impossibility of final definition. It is a negative theology, or a theology of denial.

Ultimately we cannot reduce God to human categories. God has received many names and yet always remains beyond every name. Indeed the apparently endless "naming" of God finally draws us back into the mysterious divine depths beyond the limitations of concepts and reasoning. Difficult though it may be, the Christian theological tradition suggests that we must hold in creative tension the naming of God and the process of denial or unknowing.

It is worth noting that a number of modern theologians have been fascinated by the theological possibilities of mystical writings. At this point, one example, the American David Tracy, may stand for all. He suggests that in our post-modern era "we may now learn to drop earlier dismissals of 'mysticism' and allow its uncanny negations to release us" (Tracy 360). This reflects Tracy's own journey towards a belief that theologians must turn in our present times to the apophatic language of the mystics.

> As critical and speculative philosophical theologians and artists learn to let go into the sensed reality of some event of manifestation, some experience of releasement and primal thinking, a sense of the reality of mystical experience can begin to show itself in itself. Even those with no explicit mystical experience, like myself, sense that thinking can become thanking, that silence does become, even for an Aquinas when he would "write no more," the final form of speech possible to any authentic speaker. (Tracy 385)

In the west we have inherited from the Enlightenment a philosophical belief that "knowledge" implies only abstract intelligence and objective analysis. The problem with specifically *theological* "knowledge" is that while we may be impelled to speak of God, we cannot in the end speak definitively *about* God in the sense of capturing the divine. The problem with a purely intellectual search for God is that it necessarily regards what is sought as an object to be analyzed or an objective that can be reached. Equally, the determining factor of such a search is the human capacity for understanding rather than the prior action of God. In Christian terms, in so far as we can speak of the human search for God, it will be a search that involves a continuous failure to "find" God in the ultimate sense. Thus the patristic mystical theologian Gregory of Nyssa could suggest that a "true" vision of God always involves a movement onwards.

> This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied. (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Book 2. 239 in Malherbe and Ferguson)

Viewed in this way, mysticism has a subversive quality in relation to theology. There is a clear relationship between a post-Enlightenment understanding of knowledge as objective, intelligible definition and issues of power. Thus Michel de Certeau in his final book *The Mystic Fable* suggested that those people whose lives or writings spoke of the "otherness" of a mysterious God were outsiders to the Modern project.

> Unbeknownst even to some of its promoters, the creation of mental constructs . . . takes the place of attention to the advent of the Unpredictable. That is why the "true" mystics are particularly suspicious and critical of what passes for "presence." They defend the inaccessibility they confront. (de Certeau 1992: 5)

As early as the thirteenth century, that is, since the time when theology became professionalized, spirituals and mystics took up the challenge of the spoken word. In doing so, they were displaced toward the area of "the fable." They formed a solidarity with all the tongues that continued speaking, marked in their discourse by the assimilation to the child, the woman, the illiterate, madness, angels, or the body. Everywhere they insinuate an "extraordinary": they are voices quoted – voices grown more and more separate from the field of meaning that writing had conquered, ever closer to the song or the cry (de Certeau 1992: 13).

However, mysticism is not simply a way of replacing a failing system of theological positivism with a new system of intellectual knowledge. It is something other and contrary to this way of thinking. In de Certeau's terms, drawn from his Ignatian background, mysticism is "a way of proceeding," a practice, and an action. This implies a continual transgression of fixed points (Giard in de Certeau et al. xxii–xxiii).

> The various strains of *mystics*, in their reaction to the vanishing of truths, the increasing opaqueness of the authorities and divided or diseased institutions, define not so much a complementary or substitutive knowledge, topography, or entity, but rather a different treatment of the Christian tradition . . . they institute a "style" that articulates itself into *practices* defining a *modus loquendi* and/or a *modus agendi* . . . What is essential, therefore, is not a body of doctrines (which is the effect of these practices and above all the product of later theological interpretation), but the foundation of a field in which specific procedures will be developed. (de Certeau 1992: 14)

We should recall that de Certeau himself sought to speak in a world where institutional Christianity and its theology was no longer the place of definitive meaning. All that was left, in de Certeau's mind, was a process of Christian practice, conversion, and discipleship. The Christian call is to wander, to journey with no security apart from a story of Christ that is to be enacted rather than objectively stated (de Certeau 2000: passim). Thus, paradoxically, Christian mysticism becomes a disruptive act of resistance to all attempts at final, definitive statements including the theology of institutional Christianity.

De Certeau wrote of the "mystic fable." It is a fable because it cannot claim the status of definitive truth. It is a language without obvious power. Yet paradoxically, that is its strength. Following de Certeau we must say that any discourse, not least theological discourse, is always in danger of being shattered. "Faith speaks prophetically of a Presence who is both immediately felt and yet still to come, who cannot be refused without a betrayal of all language, and yet who cannot be immediately grasped and held in terms of any particular language" (de Certeau 1966: 3–16).

The leading Anglican theologian Rowan Williams has also re-engaged with the concept of "mysticism," or better the mystical dimension of theology, in terms of a

different approach beyond purely systematic method (Williams 1991: ch. 5). Because this necessarily takes us beyond the boundaries of conceptual thought, he has a particular interest in the recovery of the apophatic dimension of mystical theology with its emphasis on the impossibility of ultimately naming God. Williams understands this apophatic approach as normative within the overall theological enterprise: "Apophasis is not a branch of theology, but an attitude which should undergird *all* theological discourse, and lead it towards the silence of contemplation and communion" (Williams 1980: 96).

Finally, in his brief but pregnant essay on "Theological Integrity," Williams has provocative things to say about the power of contemplation in the context of theological speech. For him, contemplation is about honesty and integrity in what we say about God.

> Having integrity then, is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers. Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final. (Williams 2001: 5)

This notion is a difficult lesson for theologians. However, in its deepest sense, "theology" seeks to speak ultimately of what God does and desires. Thus, theology must be rooted as much in an encounter with God and in "praise of God" as in intellectual precision.

Williams suggests that this kind of theological speech involves dispossession – a "dispossession of the human mind conceived as central to the order of the world, and a dispossession of the entire identity that exists prior to the paschal drama, the identity that has not seen and named its self-deception and self-destructiveness" (Williams 2001: 10–11). At the heart of this necessary dispossession is contemplation – a waiting on God and a process of giving place to the prior actualities of God.

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CHAPTER 36

What the Saints Know
Quasi-Epistemological Reflections

James Wetzel

Begin with a saint's dilemma. The year is 1077. Anselm is not yet of Canterbury, not yet the great Archbishop. He is still thinking his contemplative thoughts at the Benedictine monastery of Bec, where he is soon to become its abbot. Anselm tells us in the preface to the *Proslogion*, the work he is working on at the time, that he wants to find a single argument (*unum argumentum*), sufficiently potent to illuminate whatever he and his monks believe about God, but especially effective in three key areas: absolute existence, sovereign goodness, and the dependence of all creatures on the one absolutely existing sovereign God. He tries to think his way into his desired argument, to the point of exhaustion. It is only when he relaxes his intent and resolves to focus on other things that his guiding insight gets through, goading him (*cum importunitate*) to follow the path he has come to think impassable. He is to meditate on God as "the being greater than which none can be conceived" (*cogitari*). Famously Anselm turns his meditation into a proof of God's existence: a being that exists only in the mind of another is decidedly less great than a being that needs no other to exist; a truly self-subsisting being (and it turns out that there is only one of them) cannot be conceived not to exist. Less famously, but no less importantly, Anselm argues that God is inconceivable: a conceivable divinity, subject to someone else's conception, can hardly be self-subsisting. And herein lies Anselm's dilemma. If he is able to conceive of the God he reveres, then his God is not God; but if the God he reveres eludes his powers of conception, then his God is not his.[1]

One possible way out for Anselm is to lay claim to an experiential knowledge of God, or a largely non-conceptual sense of inconceivable greatness. I can't see where in the *Proslogion* Anselm does this, but imagine if he had. The knowing would have to have this much conceivability: that it is of God. An object-free knowing, feeling like nothing conceivable, is too inchoate to count as noetic; it knocks at the door of awareness but never enters the room. Meanwhile, the sensation of our current hypothetical interest

floods a barely conceivable conception of God ("the being greater than which") with rich but unutterable content. The hypothetical Anselm who has this sensation of God would be hyper-conscious, or so far removed in his awareness from his normal habits of perception that he sees clearly the unbridgeable abyss between what he is experiencing – a veritable apotheosis of sensation – and what he will be able to convey to outsiders.

Consider one way of being at a loss for words. There are many things in my experience for which I lack a complete description: the love that allows me to love my daughter and son differently and yet without partiality; the justice that both individuates and unites; the pleasures of friendship; the beauty of play. I could go on. I lack words for these things, not because I can say nothing about them (I sometimes have much to say), but because I resist thinking that my knowledge of these things is ever complete. In this way, I aim to avoid the ignorance of which Diotima, the mysterious high priestess of Plato's *Symposium*, speaks. It is not lack of knowledge that starves and imprisons the soul, but rather, as Socrates hears from Diotima, the presumption to know where one still has need of learning: "For what's especially difficult about being ignorant," warns Diotima, "is that you are content with yourself, even though you're neither beautiful and good nor intelligent. If you don't think you need anything, of course you won't want what you don't think you need" (204A; Nehamas 49). Also in keeping, I think, with wanting to avoid ignorance of this sort, I would disclaim knowing that I can *never* be free of the need for a transformed point of view. I take it on faith that in being ever desirous of better wisdom, I am not turning my back on what has been a definitive offering and wedding my desire to darkness.

Mine is not a faith without presumption, but consider the cost of a presumption-free faith, or another way of being at a loss for words. In this scenario, I would have, by way of ecstatic experience, definitive knowledge of the indescribable good; being *the* good, this good is also my good. Now what about all those other goods that I have been able, with my limited abilities, to describe? They may end up as severely limited goods, but if I am taking ineffability as a criterion of knowing the good, they lose even their limited status. Once I have a taste of the ineffable, I no longer need the illusion of other, articulable goods to sustain my desire. It does not follow from this, however, that such goods are no good at all. In losing their limited status, they fall squarely within the logic of ineffable goodness: I cannot say what makes distinctive goods good because I cannot say what makes God good. The catch is that I also cannot say what makes distinctive goods distinctive. Individuation has no foothold within a cloud of ineffability. I would need to use a language steeped in illusion even to describe the passing of the many varied goods into the one God, for, in retrospect, I see that there have been no goods but God, no goodness but unspeakable goodness. The faith required of me here has me continuing to use such a language for my worldly entanglements, confident that I will not thereby lapse into delusion myself.

Anselm's dilemma – roughly the disjuncture in ecstatic consciousness between empty conceptualization and inconceivable knowing – is a real dilemma, one that speaks to what I would call, somewhat diffidently, "the epistemology of mystical experience." And although I have certainly not said enough in my introductory remarks to rule out the possibility of an essentially inconceivable form of knowing, I am not going

to pursue this possibility further. Supposing that there is this form of knowing, it would by definition fail to connect with even the thinnest of conceptualizations. This not only creates a gulf between mystics and their experientially challenged observers; it causes a fissure within the mystics themselves, who must, after their momentary ecstasies have passed, recollect what they have lost – a task of conceptualization. It is also doubtful whether such knowing has much, if any, relevance for saintliness. Anselm, after all, is not aiming at a new and sublimely pleasurable sensation; he wants to have his life transformed, his heart made new. For this, he must resolve and not merely circumvent his dilemma. He must reunite knowing and conceiving in his knowledge of God – a task, broadly speaking, of incarnation. For the remaining two sections of this essay, I will be speaking to resolution of this sort, though without restricting myself to Anselm's case.

But first I offer a brief reflection on the broad options for analysis that are evident in the philosophical literature on mysticism. When I opt out of the purely experiential approach to mysticism, where knowledge consorts with conceptually denuded sensation, I follow a modern rather than classical approach to mystical phenomena. The modern approach is well epitomized by two analytic studies: Wayne Proudfoot's anti-apologetic analysis of the logical grammar of experiential self-reports, and William Alston's tireless defense of the grounding role that experiential awareness plays in the formation of religious, and especially Christian, beliefs.[2] Proudfoot contends that a phrase like "the being greater than which none can be conceived" is less a description of some non-linguistic entity that manifests itself in indescribable ways than it is a rule for the interpretation of experience. If Anselm believes that he has had a conceivable experience of beauty (e.g., being stirred by a plainchant), then he knows, by virtue of his regulating description of God, that his experience was mundane, not transcendent. His commitment to a preconception – in this case his preconception that God is beyond conceiving – can be said both to condition his experience and to place constraints on how he will later choose to explain it (Proudfoot 119). Although Alston sharply faults Proudfoot for seeming oblivious to the difference between what is required for the identification of an experience and what an experience makes manifest (Alston 16, 40–41), he, no less than Proudfoot, postulates an internal relation between conceptualization and experience. While practices of belief formulation do not, insists Alston, predetermine experience from the ground up, he does concede that there is no non-circular way for religious experience to ground religious belief. He just thinks that the circle is virtuous. I point out the conflict between Proudfoot and Alston not to adjudicate it (here is not the place),[3] but to indicate that the analytic rejection of inconceivable knowledge, so characteristic of the modern take on mysticism, is in itself no embrace of naturalism.

William James is the most celebrated exponent of the classical approach, and by "classical" I mean "classically modern" and relative to the early twentieth-century emergence of a science of religion.[4] In the mysticism chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the book that came out of his Gifford Lectures (1901–1902), James identifies mysticism with mystical states of consciousness and then famously distills a mystical state of mind into four elements (James 329–330): it has to be experienced to be known; it is itself revelatory; it doesn't last long; and to have it at all requires more surrender than resolve. Only the first two elements are criterial. It is possible to have

lasting, expertly engineered mystical ecstasies, but whether long or short, ruled or ruling, the experiences are always, as James dares to put it (367), "absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality."

While I have vowed to leave behind the sensationalist epistemology that makes for a classical approach to mysticism, I am not going to abandon, at least not entirely, the troubled distinction in James between the saint who lives in response to an unseen order of goodness and the mystic who has had a taste of transcendent truth. Saints in James's story begin as sick-souled types, incapable of muddling their way through worldly virtues and pleasures that have come to seem either dismally empty or appallingly vulnerable. The evil that they see is real, but they are disposed to take what most of us consider a partial truth and render it absolute: self and world, to sick souls, are mutually defined by a pervasive and multifarious dearth of goodness (James 130–131, 133ff.). The few of these souls who manage to escape lives of melancholic resignation or worse undergo, psychologically speaking, death and rebirth: they have some sort of mystical experience.

It is hard to see how mysticism and saintliness can be pulled apart in James. Mystics without saintliness are just tripping, and saints without mystical insight are just wishful thinkers. Still James treats the saint and the mystic as if they were, analytically speaking, altogether different animals. Short of becoming mystics ourselves, we can never know, says James, what a mystical state of mind is truly like. And here ignorance has its privileges. James aims to reassure when he tells us (367) that "mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto." But when it comes to saintliness, many saints are, in his view, well equipped to infiltrate the security of our mundane points of view, particularly by way of their unnerving displays of charity – which may, or may not, qualify as wisdom. How would we know? James's astounding proposal is "to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself to an ideal form of human activity" (331). *Common* sense? The implication is that whereas mystical truth is a mystic's prerogative, saints and their handlers share a common world and a relevantly similar sense of goodness.

The postclassical question I am left with, once the mystic is no longer girded with a sensationalist epistemology, is this: what does it cost us to think that some people can know the truth without also having to seek and serve the greater good? Admittedly this is not a properly epistemological question. From either a classical or modern point of view, I ought to be asking how a person can come to know the good at all, goodness being one of truth's arguably many forms. I concede the point and venture from now on only quasi-epistemological reflections. They return me to Anselm's dilemma and a classic, and quite old, story.

Eden's Puzzle: Knowledge, Good, and Evil

The story of the serpent in the garden and the loss of Eden – the Yahwist's folktale of humanity's emergence into labored life (Genesis 2:4b–3:24) – is familiar enough.[5] It begins with Yahweh, the Lord God, fashioning a human from the humus of the soil and

breathing the breath of life into his new creation: the 'a*dam*, the earthling, henceforth referred to as Adam.[6] Yahweh removes Adam from the soil of his origins and places him in a garden, Eden, where every tree is fruit-bearing and lovely to look at, including the two trees in the middle: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge, good and evil. Yahweh tells Adam that he can eat of every fruit save knowledge, "for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die" (Genesis 2:17). Having issued this warning, Yahweh then resolves to make a partner for Adam, someone to sustain him, for "it is not good for the human to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). When Adam emerges from an induced sleep, he recognizes right away that the creature crafted from one of his ribs is flesh of his flesh, bone of his bones: Adam and the woman face one another, naked and unashamed (Genesis 2:25).

Now things get interesting. A talking serpent crashes the scene and suggests to the woman that knowledge is not the danger that Yahweh has been making it out to be. "You shall not be doomed to death," the serpent tells her (Genesis 3:4–5), "for God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil." The words have their effect. The tree of knowledge looks like sex on the vine to the woman, "a lust to the eyes" (Genesis 3:6), and she eats. The man eats too, upon her offer, and the two of them quickly come to see what it is to be naked. They cover up (Genesis 3:7). Yahweh acknowledges to his heavenly court that Adam (the 'a*dam*) has indeed become more godlike, knowing good and evil, and surmises that he will next want to eat from life and live forever. But before he can eat again, Yahweh drives Adam from Eden, "to till the soil from which he had been taken" (Genesis 3:24), and posts an angelic guard to keep him from reaching the "other" forbidden tree – the one the woman seems already to have experienced in the form of (carnal) knowledge.[7] By now, Adam has named her Eve, "the mother of all that lives" (Genesis 3:20), as if she were herself the tree of life.

The folktale, to say the least, abounds in symbolic possibilities. In typically Christian readings, where the dire nature of disobedience gets the emphasis, the serpent symbolizes Satan, the original agent of evil, here lying through his fangs to seduce human flesh and spirit into a place of irredeemable darkness. While not wishing to deny this kind of reading its due, I offer a different way into the symbolism. Start with what is, to my mind, the most dramatic but least elaborated turn in the story. The woman has taken her fateful bite; now she is offering to share her knowledge with her partner, the man. Consider his position. He breathes in Yahweh's breath, but it is she who completes his flesh. So which is it to be for him, the breath of his breath or the flesh of his flesh? Where I might be inclined to imagine a soliloquy worthy of a Hamlet, full of rueful indecision, the Yahwist seems to see only a ready response (Genesis 3:6): "she also gave to her man, and he ate." But perhaps to call his participation in her knowledge "a response" is already to say too much. For when has Adam ever really been outside this knowledge? No one had to tell him that the woman was flesh of his flesh, bone of his bones; he just woke up to what he knew already. And as for her, notice that she does not fall into a dispirited knowledge of her own nakedness when she first takes from the forbidden tree and eats; it is only after Adam partakes that they both feel the urge to cover up their loins – perhaps to hide the sight from one another, but more likely to hide it from Yahweh, who sees death in the knowledge they have tasted. The real puzzle of

Eden – and the key to its symbolism – is how a good knowledge becomes evil, becomes lacking, that is, in its own original goodness.

Some insight into this can be had by looking into the exchange between Yahweh and the newly disobedient human couple – the serpent is also there, but silent (Genesis 3:8–19). Yahweh calls a frightened Adam out of hiding and asks him how he had come to learn of his nakedness. Who told him? Had he eaten from knowledge? Adam's words in reply are as veiling as his loincloth (Genesis 3:12): "The woman whom you gave by me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." What he says is both literally true and a lie of heart; under the guise of reporting two gifts, Adam has undone his gratitude, wed himself to a lonesome self-preservation, and offered up his partner (and even his God) to condemnation. When Yahweh turns his attention next to the woman, the bolder transgressor, she opts for self-effacement as her preferred mode of evasion: "The serpent beguiled me," she admits (Genesis 3:13), "and I ate." The implication of beguilement is that she doesn't know her heart well enough to know the difference between what serves her life and what starves it. Perhaps that is true for the woman who suddenly finds herself partnered to her man's second thoughts, but not for Eve, the mother of all that lives. Eve knows that knowledge and life are fruits from one tree; she knows that when Yahweh, her partner in matters conceivable (Genesis 4:1), forbids knowledge and warns of death, he is both offering his human children a safe haven from mortal travails and eliciting in them an independent desire to know life and leave the garden. (Yahweh, no less than the serpent, is a master of irony.) On the reading I am proposing here, the God who keeps all mother-born humans from returning to Eden has warned against a first taste of knowledge, a fall into mortality, and outrightly blocked a second, an undoing of birth. A birth, like a death, is indelible, and in a realm of mixed parentage, where flesh moves with and against spirit, there is never the one without the other. The two perspectives in Genesis on life's knowledge – heavenly and earth-bound – are less antithetical than they have been made to seem.

But what about the apparent antithesis? In the broadly Augustinian tradition that includes the likes of Anselm, the antithesis is taken very seriously indeed, hardly as a mere appearance. The woman's trust of the serpent gets read as her (beguiled) complicity with Satan, the incorrigible subverter, and largely as a result of that complicity, the fleshly enfolding of one human beginning within another proves, in every case but one, to be a corrupting form of nurture. It is only through being in touch with Christ's blessedly innocent gestation in Mary (here the anti-Eve) that a few saints – I think of Augustine, Anselm, Teresa of Avila – are able to rise to an erotically charged experience of God and not incur the taint of sexualized sin.

For my quasi-epistemological purposes, the alleged disparity between Eve and Mary is less important than the epistemic distance between the Yahwist's Yahweh and the being greater than which none can be conceived. Is Yahweh even conceivably the sublime being that Anselm is seeking, with all his life's senses (*sensus animae*), to know? Take it for granted that Anselm is dogmatically committed to Yahweh's identity as the most high, Lord God, before whom there is no other. My question is not whether Yahweh is Anselm's God, but whether the Yahwist's characterization of Yahweh works against Anselm's kind of contemplative ascesis. There are two quite different ways in which it might be thought to do so.

In one, Yahweh's garden antics render him too conceivable a deity. He creates with mud, takes walks in the breeze, competes with a serpent for human attention, and loses his temper when he doesn't get his way. How is any of that sublime? To remain proper contemplatives, we would have to attribute Yahweh's anthropomorphic behavior to a symbolic or allegorical form of discourse. It is not that Yahweh, as God, ever truly gets angry or jealous, messy or whimsical; he just needs to be described that way until we have learned to recognize better the dispensable parts of ourselves: the imperfections, the vices, the immaturities. But as contemplative ascesis takes us deeper into what Anselm calls "inaccessible light," all symbolism becomes increasingly empty. An imperfect virtue never finds its perfect paradigm in the goodness that falls beyond conceiving, for there perfection is pointless (and there, of course, there is no "there"). At the hypothetical end of ascesis, Yahweh will have come to symbolize the inconceivable God no better and no worse than any other imagined alternative. We are back to wanting ineffably noetic sensations and hoping that saints like Anselm have had them.

But now consider the other way that the Yahwist, through Yahweh, offers us a symbol of divinity and not the full view. Here the Yahwist is in able control of the symbolism and stands in no need of outside, allegorical intervention. Just read the story and notice how Yahweh begins to impersonate a lesser version of himself. The turning point comes when the two human characters, sobered by the separative power of knowledge, decide to hide from Yahweh rather than face him directly. They create in their imaginations a creator who is foreign to the power of conception, even hostile to it. Yahweh does not force them to imagine otherwise; he plays the part of the deity that they would have him be. This he does by sowing discord between the serpent and the woman's seed, multiplying the woman's pain in childbirth, and making Adam's labor in the soil wearisome and thorny (Genesis 3:14–19). All told, the chastisements speak to an extraordinary (but not absolute) resistance to the life that comes from a conception of life, from a seed. The old belief that a seed has to die to give life (John 12:24; 1 Corinthians 15:36) hints at the knowledge, good and evil, that is struggling to regain its footing in human awareness. Yahweh has already done his part here, first by rendering the knowledge desirable (the command not to eat) and then by making the desire irresistible (the creation of the woman). In a later narrative tradition, though one largely in keeping with the Yahwist's sensibilities, even Yahweh doesn't resist the woman. Not only does he conceive a son with her; he identifies himself with that son. The years pass, and God incarnate grows up both to endure and to eradicate a human misconception: the one that has God hating a mortal life.

When I suggest that the Yahweh who disdains conception is less than the God that the saints want to know, I am not thinking of conception in sexual terms, or at least not in terms that confine sexuality to an affair of the flesh. I follow the Yahwist, who thinks of conception as the alchemy that binds spirit to flesh and renders flesh miraculously self-exceeding. The most spectacular illustration of this would be Christ's resurrection, but who among the living can claim to have seen that? Fortunately, there are more mundane examples to be had, lying closer to the bone of familiar flesh. Most parents tend to notice over time that their children, though like one or both of them in many ways, are not the sum of mother and father. Their personalities exceed what is given – or, it must be admitted, fall short of it. Some parents, though I would like to

think most, meditate on their knowledge, good and not-so-good, of their children and look for the good that both honors what they know and reunites it with an original abundance: eternal, but never static, life. Meditation on the being greater than which none can be conceived is certainly a meditation on conceivability but also on what has been conceived already – parentally or otherwise.

I don't pretend to have resolved Anselm's dilemma. It is, in any case, less a dilemma to be resolved than taken to heart, where it pushes and pulls against the *rigor mortis* of a fixed point of view. The saint is always going to want to move the mystic out of the sanctuary of knowing and towards an unaccommodated goodness, ripe with new conception. To the extent that I am prepared, in my quasi-epistemological way, to speak of a mystical knowing, I am prepared to speak of a knowing dispossession. I do so next.

Knowledge Dispossessed: The Mystic's Ascent

Imagine a meditation on God much different from Anselm's. It doesn't begin with a prayer (though it might have ended with one); it begins in the naked solitude of a self-reflection. You are chagrined to think of the many falsehoods that you mistook for truth in your youth, and now you are wondering why you still trust yourself. What has changed for you, just your age? And why should that matter? What you have yet to confront in yourself is your willingness to be deceived, either because you lack discipline or because you have an active, if unacknowledged, desire not to know the truth. The only way to confront a lack of discipline is to engage in one, and that you are doing through mental effort. An unacknowledged desire is a more elusive foe, like a serpent in a garden. You decide to magnify the threat: life with a deceiver greater than which you cannot conceive. Your concocted Satan is you, of course, and it reflects the magnitude of your fear of being taken in – in this case by yourself. But if you can cleanly dissociate yourself from your inner deceiver, then you have some chance of being restored to an unselfconscious mode of knowing and the uncorrupted life that you have thus far been unable to recall. Only your discipline will tell.

The beauty of the meditation – and also its limitation – lies in its economized sense of discipline. Although you are your own deceiver, you ignore the side of you that invents simulacra of truth and you maintain a doubter's posture: your deceiver may be offering you (deceptively) the purest of truths; you refuse your assent nonetheless and thereby fashion, doubt by doubt, an impregnable sanctuary for knowledge. The ruling idea here is that no truth but your own is on the inside of your doubts, where knowledge never parts you from yourself and leaves you feeling vulnerable. Notice, above all, how blessedly powerless you are to carry out the sentence: I doubt that I exist. Here to doubt would be to disown the self that doubts, and having dissociated yourself from your demiurgic twin, the inventive deceiver, you have no other self to be. So here is your first and foundational truth: that you are undoubtedly the self that doubts. The God who stays within your sanctuary to offer you further truths will be defined by your doubts, and a doubting self is nothing if not security conscious.

Readers of Descartes will recognize that I have been rehearsing some of the private mythology of the first meditation, where a methodologically broody Descartes enters a

waking dream and then faces off with "a malicious demon" (*malignus genius*; Descartes 1986, p. 15).[8] He plays doubter to his demon and aims at doubt's triumph – the cathartic first step towards secure knowledge. In one regard, however, I have altered his trajectory. When Descartes speaks of the risk of being deceived, he indicts the senses and never squarely addresses the possibility of self-deception. "Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true," he writes (Descartes 12), "I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once." The indictment takes in the usual tricks of perception – the bend of a partially submerged stick, the smallness of a distant object – and adds to that the possibility of wholesale sensory distortion, or life in a waking dream. Descartes argues for the dream possibility, thereby obscuring what is illusory about the indictment itself. He does not in fact get his sense of truth from his senses. He gets it from his mind's eye, the part of him able to see truth without having to consider a material context at all. (Think of arithmetic equations and geometric symmetries.[9])

It isn't his senses, then, that have caused him to be deceived, but his own habit-forming willingness to divert his attention from the one real source of truth and credit a wholly imagined alternative. The demon hypothesis might have become his occasion for venturing into the labyrinth of self-deception, where he is somehow both deceived and deceiver. But Descartes does remarkably little with the hypothesis. His doubting self is not very doubtful, after all, about the finality of mathematical truths and the God of his mind's eye. In the beginning of the third meditation, before he has replaced his deceiver with God, he is already prepared to declare that no deceiver can bring it about that he is nothing while he is thinking that he is something, "or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five" (Descartes 25). And later on in the fifth meditation, where he considers God's existence a second time, we learn that God's existence is no less certain to him than a mathematical truth.

I pause to interject something of a Cartesian muse into my quasi-epistemological reflections for one principal reason: I want to signal how much a supposed paradigm of epistemology (nothing "quasi" or vaguely mystical about it) owes to a private mythology. The mythology is private inasmuch as its two main protagonists – the radical doubter and the demonic deceiver – are the twin birth of personal ingenuity. Descartes imagines the deceiver greater than which *he* cannot conceive; he does not imagine the deceiver greater than which *none* can be conceived.

Here are the words he uses to frame his mind's resolve (Descartes 15): "I will suppose that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning (*summe potentem & callidum*) has employed all of his energies in order to deceive me." Descartes makes it sound as if he were making a choice between the divine deceiver and the demonic one, but his prior supposition has been that "everything said about God is a fiction" (14). The being deemed to be omnipotent and supremely good is, for present purposes, just someone's conception and nothing more (the assumption of Anselm's fool). But if there is no God, no source of truth, what can a deceiver do but lamely lean on the pseudo-truth that there is no truth and try to convince a doubter that truth exists? Descartes doesn't say anything about his deceiver's technique, but it is easy enough to imagine a tedious parade

of simple arithmetic and the dare, "Try not to believe that!" He never thinks to imagine that his inner deceiver has touched upon God only to reject that knowledge and chase after a fiction; he never imagines then that his deceiver is now bent on convincing its shadow – the half-hearted rebel, the doubter – of the fiction. But surely the greater deceiver is the one who knows the truth and turns from it and not the one who casts blindly into the dark and knows God no better than the doubter does. And if a fiction of God can somehow be made to seem more compelling than God, what greater power of deception can there be?

Perhaps none, but who would know? In the itinerary of saintliness any knowledge of having become an ultimate deceiver, able to see past God and dress up a void, gets firmly dispossessed. Consider the case of saint Augustine, looking back in book 7 of the *Confessions* (O'Donnell, *conf.* 7.10.16 to 7.17.23) at what many have taken to be his first mystical experience.[10] He describes himself at the time as incapable of thinking of God other than in bodily terms – as lacking, that is, a notion of spirit – and as tormented by the problem of evil (*conf.* 7.3.5): "Is not my God not only good but also the good itself? How then," he asks in anguish, "do I come to want evil and not what is good?"[11] Augustine gets both a revelation of spirit and a perplexing insight into his own, self-described perversity when he begins reading in Platonist literature (most likely Plotinus). Soon after being exhorted to turn within and enter his own intimacies (*intima mea*), he feels himself being snatched away and taken up to a place he refers to as "a place of unlikeness" (*regio dissimilitudinis*; *conf.* 7.10.16). It is indeed an unlikely place. Above him, but far away, he hears God calling out to him, and the cry breaks through his heart's resistance to loving a beloved undefined by time or place. Below him, he surveys all the other things, the things not God, and he sees in their integration a virtual Eden – a place of divinely cultivated beauty, without evil (*conf.* 7.13.19). The most telling part of the vision is Augustine's lack of place within it. He is not at one with the God above; he is not an instrument of the beauty below. And since God and the created order exhaust for him all the possibilities of being, there is nothing for him to be or become in his assumed unlikeness. He has been trying to dwell in a place fit only for the leaving, and that, more than the sight of a still alien perfection, has been the real offering of his experience.

Think again of this conjunction. On one side there is Augustine wanting to embrace evil and reject what is good; here he styles himself the serpent in his life's garden, the spoiler of an original perfection. This is the saint's confession. On the other side there is Augustine acknowledging his inability to conceive of life with God and clear his mind of a materialist's obsession; here he styles himself an unhappy Adam, hoping to cheat the dying part of knowledge and live his limited life forever. This is the mystic's lament. The saint, when conjoined to the mystic, must confess again: Augustine knows too little to claim a serpent's wisdom; his alienation from the good has not been his to will. The mystic, when conjoined to the saint, must seek a different kind of knowing: the way out of a materialist's obsession is through a materialist's clarity; Augustine has to take in the truth, voiced by Yahweh, that flesh is mortal.

If all of this made for an easy conjunction, I wouldn't be offering just quasi-epistemological reflections; I would be taking a saint's dictation. But there is still reason to hope, despite imperfect knowledge, that it is part of an eternal inspiration to be able

to love a life that dies with both grief and gratitude. Augustine gets his best sense of *that* particular conjunction when he and his dying mother are taken up together into the third heaven, where "life is the wisdom through which all things – those that were and those that will be – are created" (*conf.* 9.10.23). There, in that alter Eden, there is no conflict between eternal wisdom and mortal life, and a son knows who his mother is. The hard part of knowledge, though still conjoined to its goodness, is to know that time, in God's embrace, is as much preserved as it is suspended. Monica dies less than a week after her mystical visit to paradise with her son, and Augustine feels the sharp pain of their parting (*conf.* 9.12.29).

The dispossession that releases a saint from a place of unlikeness and gives a mystic something to know is less the acceptance of death than surrender to self-limiting life. The God of Anselm's dilemma, the God both conceivable and not, has to be self-limiting or there is nothing for anyone to conceive. But doubtless it is tempting to forget that self-limitation in God is itself inconceivable. Descartes forgets this when he insists that God, following an imperative not to deceive, has deigned to become mathematics – a clear and distinct form of self-limitation. But this is just truncated mysticism. The saint's God is less apt to spare us the labor of becoming other to ourselves when we know. There is no conceivable knowledge of God that is not a self-offering. The inconceivable part is what we receive in return.

Notes

1   For the text and translation of Anselm's *Proslogion*, I am using Charlesworth, but I prefer to translate "cogitari" as "conceived" rather than (more blandly) "thought." Conceiving connotes a creativity that mere thinking does not. It is when Anselm is still conceiving of God that he demonstrates God's existence. See *Proslogion* chs. 2, 3. This part of the *Proslogion* begins the history of the so-called "ontological argument." I am not convinced that Anselm has an ontological argument to offer, not in anything like the modern sense, but I won't argue the point here. But see Marion. Anselm first argues for God's inconceivability in *Proslogion* ch. 15 (a deceptively short chapter). After this come several chapters of chastened meditation on "inaccessible light" (*lux inaccessibilis*).

2   Proudfoot, and Alston. For an illuminating summary and critique of Alton's intricate argument, see Gale. For an approach to religious experience that gratefully takes up where Proudfoot leaves off, see Taves, especially her chapter on explanation and attribution theory (ch. 3).

3   I will say this much. I do not think, pace Alston, that Proudfoot's interest in the conditioning effect of preconceptions commits him to the (ridiculous) view that experiences are always *of* concepts. He remains open to the possibility that mystical belief and practice are best explained by what mystics experience of God. But he does not believe that such a possibility is likely to be very illuminating. Proudfoot is more cognitive psychologist than theologian (hence Alston's animus).

4   I do not mean "classical" to refer to the ancient or pre-modern world. There is reason to believe that most pre-modern theologians lacked our modern obsession with the first-person perspective and so were not inclined to turn a theological logic of negation into a personal experience of absolute otherness. See Turner ch. 11, "From mythical theology to mysticism," and also Louth, the marvelous "Afterword."

5   For my translation of Genesis, I will be using Alter, whose running commentary on the text highlights the literary subtleties of the ancient Hebrew.

6   Alter 8, n. 7, explains that "human/humus" is his rendering of the Hebrew pairing, 'a*dam*/'a*damah*: the 'a*dam* is from the 'a*damah*, the soil of the earth. When I revert to calling the human "Adam," I mean to keep the generic force of the name while also signaling a specific character.

7   The woman never clearly distinguishes between the two trees. When the serpent asks her whether Yahweh had forbidden her and her partner to eat from any of the trees, she replies that he was speaking only of the tree "in the midst of the garden" (Genesis 3:3). Life and knowledge are both "in the midst" (Genesis 2:9).

8   My source for the Latin of Meditations *on First Philosophy* (second edition, 1642) is Adam and Tannery 1996.

9   "For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false" (Descartes 14).

10   But there have been little consensus as to its significance. I have learned much from Kenney. See also O'Donnell xx–xxxii, for a masterful synopsis of a century of scholarship on the *Confessions*.

11   My source for Augustine's Latin is O'Donnell. Translations are my own.

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CHAPTER 37

Mysticism and the Vernacular

Denis Renevey

The period from the second half of the thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth century was a turning point in vernacular languages' claim for universal potential in medieval Europe. Authority-laden fields such as theology and medicine made use of the vernacular as part of a transmission process that aimed to fulfill the needs of new and emerging audiences comprising educated lay people. In England alone several thousand medical and scientific texts (Acker 413) from this period are extant in the English vernacular, not to mention the large body of texts that continued to be written in the second English vernacular, Anglo-Norman. Herbals, prognostications, lapidaries, astronomical and astrological treatises, as well as academic medical treatises, mainly translated from Latin, flourished in England and on the continent, in the vernaculars specific to each geographical location (Acker 416–417). It is not insignificant that, in parallel to the translation and production of medical texts, the same period witnessed an extraordinary production of vernacular theologies in the form of mystical treatises, visionary accounts, pastoral and confessional manuals. Although antecedent periods had seen the emergence of impressive religious texts in the vernacular, this period was a particularly flourishing one for vernacular theologies. The causes for the emancipation of the European vernaculars against Latinate culture and, more particularly, how two domains such as theology and medicine oversaw the transfer of their authoritative content from Latin into the vernacular, are complexly embroiled in the socio-political events of the period and are difficult to pinpoint precisely. This cultural transfer, either by means of translation or original compositions, negotiated the reassessment of authority in a language which slowly found its own *Sitz-im-Leben* ("setting in life") against the powerful machinery of Latinate culture, for an audience emancipated from the need of learned intermediaries, such as priests or university trained medical practitioners.

The exploration of the corpus embraced by the term "vernacular theology" has significantly changed the landscape in the field of religious literature written in England,

and continental Europe to a lesser extent.[1] This corpus, consisting of a large variety of religious writings, has provided useful evidence for the contextualization of the role played by vernacular theology in late medieval ecclesiastical history. For instance, the Oxford translation debate that took place within the context of the late fourteenth-century Wycliffite heresy showed the degree of importance that the vernacular language received in its valuation as a successful conduit for the transmission of sophisticated theological matters (Aston 27–72; Boose, in Somerset et al. *Lollards* 217–236). Nicholas Watson's 1995 groundbreaking article, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England," suggested a new way of looking at the production of religious writings in the late medieval period by showing how political involvement in textual religious culture shaped the extant corpus that was produced from the thirteenth century up to the Reformation. One of Watson's important points is that Arundel's 1409 Constitutions, aimed at stopping circulation and production of heretical writings in the vernacular, had a larger impact and put to a stop the innovative and insular production of vernacular mystical theologies. Following Watson's article, studies of the corpuses of the so-called Middle English mystics (Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the Cloud author, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe) are now very strongly anchored in their cultural context. Also, "vernacular theology" as a category embraces a larger corpus of religious texts than that of the mystical texts and invites its close scrutiny, with an interest in the way this broad corpus participated in shaping the religious textual culture of its time and contributed to religious medieval mentality.

If the response to Watson has been generally positive, some scholars have argued for broadening the corpus even more, questioning for instance the neglect of medieval drama as a locus for serious theological debate and practice (Crassons 99–100) or noting that Watson's powerful and influential argument "focused on a limited chronological period, but also on a restricted range of treatises written for reading rather than for oral or public performance" (Gillespie 2007: 406). The spreading out of the landscape unveiled by Watson promises new and fascinating explorations of vernacular theologies characterized by performative and public dimensions. However, one of the side-effects generated by the broadening of this landscape is, at best, a move away from issues that are specifically pertinent to vernacular mystical theologies or, at worst, their relative neglect as part of broader discussions on vernacular theologies. Being now at the farthest point of the spectrum in the field, their role as part of the larger narrative has lessened substantially.

This chapter offers a vision of the making of vernacular mystical theologies in Europe within a larger perspective – encompassing linguistic, historical, social, and cultural paradigms. Our perception of the rise of the European vernaculars in the late medieval period is as yet far too patchy and does not allow for a comprehensive picture. Similarly, no large-scale attempt has yet been made in assessing the way in which vernacular theologies grew in continental Europe.[2] The material used as evidence for my points in this chapter relies significantly on the English material and does not offer an exhaustive perspective of the landscape of European vernacular contemplative texts; it argues, however, that both national and supra-national politico-religious events need to be taken into consideration as powerful agents in the shaping of this European landscape.[3]

In particular, this chapter considers the rise of expression of "mystical" or "contemplative feeling" in the vernacular as a foundational moment in the history of theology and emotion.[4] This new form of religious expression dramatically changed the way in which individuals perceived their own self in the larger cosmic order. Although relatively few individuals claimed a direct experience of ultimate relationship with the divine, the various textual expressions of the few who did led to the composition and circulation of a large body of vernacular mystical theologies, concerned either with sharing experiential knowledge or with providing systematic psycho-religious textual approaches in order to achieve it. Not all vernacular theologies are vernacular mystical theologies. Since the invention of the term "vernacular theology," made jointly by Bernard McGinn and Nicholas Watson (Watson 1995: 823–824), its usefulness has been amply demonstrated for the consideration of the religious landscapes in general, boosting interest in specific genres (virginity literature, lives of saints) and broadening the horizon of textual vernacular religious culture in encouraging the study of texts that fell outside the category of the "mystics." Given the need to narrow this scope for the purposes of this volume, in this chapter I shall focus on vernacular mystical theologies.

Under "vernacular mystical theology" is understood any text that either purports to provide the direct encounter of an "I-voice" with a divine entity, or any text that aims to provide tools or systematic strategies that enable such an encounter. It therefore excludes a large range of vernacular theologies, such as catechetical treatises, hagiographies, or edifying sermons or pastoral manuals, just to mention a few. This chapter is divided into four sections. The introductory section, "Contemplative Feeling," addresses the way in which expression of contemplative feeling achieved its apogee via the conduit of the vernacular. It also makes a case for the intellectual sophistication of such a mode of thought. "Vernacular Mysticism and Experiential Knowledge" looks at the importance given to the investment of the self in the expression of an experience that has a profound individual connotation. "Women and Textual Culture" addresses the question of composition of vernacular mystical theologies and the role played by women within it. Whatever the importance of the experiential in vernacular mystical theologies, some of them are politically charged and show a desire to interact and possibly change the course of specific secular and religious contemporary issues. "Vernacular Theology Does Politics" provides several examples of such interactions with contemporary issues.

Contemplative Feeling

Contemplative feeling is a core feature of vernacular mystical theologies, either as a particular mode of thought finding expression in a textual account that recounts it as an individual experience, or as part of a system that aims to provide the reader or listener with the tools to experience it (Renevey 2011). My own definition of vernacular mystical theology, interchangeable with "vernacular contemplative theology," embraces a larger corpus of texts than the category of the mystics (Renevey 2011: 91–112), but is nevertheless limited to texts that address human beings' capacity to psychologically

attune to a particular affective state conducive to a contemplative experience. As stated by Watson, contemplation is associated with "(1) the private cultivation of a loving relationship with God; (2) the humbly receptive scrutiny of God . . . and (3) an implied image of ascent to God." (Watson 2011: 15). Although limited to these three main categories, the contemplative experience can take many forms and shapes, depending on the object of contemplation and the approach (cataphatic or apophatic, intellectual or affective) used to reach such a psychological state.

Theories of contemplation were well known in the west by the time vernacular mystical theologies made their impact on the western mystical tradition. In addition to the carefully crafted treatises dealing with theoretical aspects of contemplation that appeared in great numbers in the twelfth century among the Cistercians (see Chapter 16, this volume), Victorines (see Chapter 17, this volume), and the Carthusians, treatises providing first-hand experience of the contemplative experience also appeared in the Latin language more or less simultaneously. Both the theoretical and practical writings contributed to a better understanding of the role played by the *affectiones* in medieval psychology. A large number of treatises inviting contemplative activity made use of these discoveries performatively, based on intense scrutiny of the crucifixion, which aimed to bring about inner transformation of the self.

Affective meditations on the subject of Christ's Passion and crucifixion accrue in enormous numbers during the late medieval period. The development of this specific form of contemplation has often been linked to the rise of Franciscan spirituality, a very important example of which was the Latin text, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, usually attributed to Johannes de Caulibus. Recent scholarship, however, has questioned the male authorship and, while not disputing Franciscan influence, has convincingly argued that gender is of greater importance here than Franciscanism. Sarah McNamer has argued that the original text of this influential Passion meditation is not the Latin text attributed to Johannes de Caulibus, but an anonymous Italian version that was considered by previous scholarship to be a corrupt and poor version of the supposedly Latin original.[5] This Italian text was written at the request of a nun, by a nun.[6] The Latin version, put together by Johannes de Caulibus on the basis of the Italian original, is therefore a Franciscan adaptation into which significant speculative theological parts are inserted. If, therefore, the role played by the Franciscans in the rise of the affective tradition of meditative scrutiny on the Passion is far from being insignificant, women's role as important contributors to that tradition in the vernacular in the western Christian tradition deserves fuller attention.

Contemplative feeling expressed in the vernacular is therefore strongly associated to women's participation in textual culture. Early thirteenth-century texts like the Canonici Italian meditation on the Passion, *The Wooing of Our Lord*, and Thomas of Hales' "Love Run," for example, share the particularity of being addressed to female recipients. They contribute to the invention of medieval compassion, which is achieved in these cases via an attentive consideration of the events of the Passion of Christ, with emphasis on the crucifixion. The capacity of these texts to move the soul towards a desire for God in his humanity is effected by the emotional response that they solicit. The human ability to "suffer with" (Latin "cum patior") is highly gendered and requires from male

or female authors, listeners, performers, or readers an inner connection with their feminine side[7] (see Chapter 3, this volume).

If compassion constitutes an aspect of contemplative feeling, it is only one of the *affectiones* that characterize it. Vernacular texts that expose or solicit performatively contemplative feeling benefit from the complex investigations into the medieval psyche that were carried on at the monastic and scholastic centers from the twelfth century onwards. *Affectiones*, generated within the mind by the *affectus*, were systematically analyzed in the way they contributed to the making of a contemplative experience. Some *affectiones* or psychological dispositions, like fear, shame, compassion, or love, are used as part of the implementation of a state of feeling that a text wants to elicit. The systematic analysis by the Victorines as to the effect love has when directed towards a proper object of contemplation illustrates the degree of sophistication that marked twelfth-century psychology.[8] The transfer and application of this system into vernacular mystical theologies opened a new era in Christian spirituality. Contemplative feeling, as demonstrated by Gallus in his explanations about the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, engages both the *affectiones* and the *ratio* and induces sophisticated intellective reflection. Clearly distinct from the speculative theology as practiced by the schools, the psychological dimension of this particular form of theology makes the vernacular an apt channel whereby experiments with the self in its connection with the divine can be explored more dangerously and more deeply, at the political and psychological levels.

Nuns, anchorites and hermits, followed by lay people educated in the vernacular, were able to explore their own interiority by using material made available to them in what became the new universal language against the hierarchically and conservative Latin. The vernacular allowed the exploration of new territories and the gaining of authority in new ways. If contemplative feeling and experience remained somewhat elitist and limited in terms of practice to only a few, its foundation on experiential knowledge required competence that was not exclusive to the academically trained but that was also possible for those who showed the right disposition for this new kind of theological inventiveness. Even if his mystical theology was one of the most sophisticated systems offered in the vernacular, the fourteenth-century *Cloud*-author warned against an approach that would be intellectual only (see Chapter 24, this volume). In this example, as in several other continental vernacular mystical theologies, the author shows a capacious and contagious confidence in what he has to offer to his readership, not as a system that is subservient to the speculative theology of the academy, but as a system based on a set of premises noteworthy for its audacity and innovativeness.

Vernacular Mysticism and Experiential Knowledge

The shift from Latin to vernacular mystical theology was a turning point whose repercussions went beyond an intricate linguistic shift. It opened a completely new horizon for the couching of experiential knowledge lived in cultural and social contexts that were propitious to psycho-religious experiences. This new brand of mysticism addressed selves acquiring experience according to parameters exclusive to these milieus, in which they could discover their inner structural design with tools that allowed more

maneuver and allowed for new intertextual exchanges to which vernacular secular literature contributed significantly.[9] The vernacular therefore opened completely uncharted psychological and theological territories that, as in the case of Marguerite Porete's *Mirror* (last quarter of thirteenth century), destabilized and even threatened the church as an institution, and made the Latin mystical theologies rather outdated in the eyes of these vernacular mystical theology precursors. No longer being the preserve of elite masculine culture, vernacular mystical theologies become the arena where both male and female practitioners engaged in an energetic exchange whereby power relations were constantly assessed and renegotiated in the process of charting their boundaries.

Twelfth-century Cistercian spirituality played a major role in developing a mystical theology that emphasized experiential knowledge. Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs figure an "I-voice" that the listeners or the readers performed in their discovery of divine realities by experiencing affectively the love of God through the person of the crucified Christ. Bernard offered a journey that is mapped onto the crucified body, with a movement upwards from the nailed feet to the crowned head of Jesus. Meditation on Christ's wounds generated an affective response that can only be effective if actively performed by the readers or listeners. Influenced by the affective meditations that Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) had written for the attention of Countess Mathilda of Canossa, a devout and politically powerful woman who was a great supporter of the church, Cistercian mystical theology gave prominence to the love of God in a way that was innovative in the medieval west. This pioneering psychological approach took shape within the traditional literary monastic exegetical consideration of the biblical material. The emerging vernacular mystical theologies of the early thirteenth century owed a large debt to that innovative move in the twelfth century, even if the transfer was a very complex one, with a multiplicity of influences.

For instance, the role played by the Victorine canons in Paris in the promotion of the mystical life outside of the monastic setting was one of the many factors that contributed to the spread of the mystical tradition in the wider world.[10] Following the more flexible Augustinian rule, the Victorine canons favored an ascetic life modeled on Cistercian practice, while nevertheless showing a strong interest in pastoral matters. Their contact with vibrant academic Parisian urban life and their pastoral responsibilities towards Parisian students led them into an exploration of the mystical life with the tools of scholasticism. Richard of St.-Victor's (d. 1173) systematic approach to the mystical life, encapsulated in his *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Major*, stands as an impressive testimony to the continued interest in the mystical life by the Victorine canons and their desire to circulate it outside the monastic wall.

The overwhelming influence of the Latin tradition in the shaping of vernacular mystical theologies notwithstanding, it is also correct, I believe, to claim that these vernacular mystical theologies marked a new starting point in the history of western spirituality because they allowed for experiential knowledge to be conveyed or gained via the medium of vernacular languages. The move out of the monasteries, facilitated also by the pastoral zeal of the new mendicant friars in the thirteenth century, as well as by the prohibition of the foundation of new monastic orders by Canon 13 of the Lateran Council in 1215, created fertile ground for this shift. Beguines and beghards

in the Low Countries and in Northern France, hermits, anchorites, Franciscan and Dominican nuns and brothers all resorted to their respective vernaculars for the spread of their mystical theologies (see Chapters 19, 21, 22, and 23, this volume). *Van seven manieren van mine* (*The seven ways of divine love*), from the *Vita* of the beguine and then Cistercian nun Beatrice of Nazareth (d. 1268) stands as an early example of transference of mystical experiential knowledge from Latin to vernacular languages. Initially written in Flemish, the treatise was translated into Latin before being destroyed by the church authorities.[11] It offers an ambitious program providing the soul with seven ways of developing love for the divine. The treatise presents a sophisticated system in which desire is apprehended via affective and intellective means.

The Wooing of Our Lord (early thirteenth century), an affective meditation linked to *Ancrene Wisse* on thematic, linguistic, and manuscript grounds, resorts to the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs as a trigger for an affective performance focused on the crucifixion. The way in which the erotic vocabulary of the Song of Songs is used in this text differs significantly from the much more cautious strategies used by its early twelfth-century commentators, who deployed it in a carefully crafted narrative in which the allegorization of the characters as the soul and the Godhead prevents too carnal or emotional a reading. *The Wooing* instead calls the reader/performer to load semantically the terms of love with a more personal understanding of their meaning. Together with an address to the human person of Christ suffering on the cross, the investment of the "I-voice" with the highly charged erotic vocabulary in the loosely organized narrative allows for the deployment of personal affective states that have feminine characteristics, such as compassion and maternal love.

This text, as several others from this and other periods, whether written by men or women, attest to the role played by the feminization of mystical theology initiated by nuns and continued by the Cistercians, in the footsteps of the Anselmian meditative tradition. In the case of Porete and Beatrice of Nazareth, focus was placed on the soul's desire to come to a face-to-face with the godhead, and the moving of the soul to achieve that ambitious aim relies on a subtle blending of biblical and secular bridal imagery. In the case of other mystical theologies, spiritual desire was initiated and developed to a large extent by giving much prominence to the humanity of Jesus and by attributing highly feminine qualities to his crucified body. This process of feminization progressed alongside the development of vernacular languages as authoritative vehicles for the circulation of sophisticated theological thoughts. Perceptions of the divine became tinged with attributes most often associated with the feminine. From an angry, revengeful, and unpredictable God, a new vision of a loving, compassionate, and forgiving one emerged. Motherly and feminine qualities were given to God and, most particularly, to the second person of the Trinity, Christ.

However, the translation of this feminized mystical experiential knowledge into vernacular languages raises a series of questions. While Latin's ability at conveying and triggering affective experiential knowledge was not put into question, as for example the commentary on the Song of Songs of William of St.-Thierry can attest, the case of the vernacular, in contrast to Latin, was nevertheless particular in the way it enabled the expression of a subjectivity unchartered by the machinery of the Latin academic and monastic traditions, in which this subjectivity was initially shaped within a set of well-established communal rules. To claim that community did not play a role in

shaping the substance of vernacular mystical theologies is not in question, but they negotiate the place of the self in communities that are less rigorously charted and which therefore allow for the emergence of textual selves that have more idiosyncrasies than Latinate culture would allow.

Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, written in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, is a good case in point. It combined the learning of Latinate culture, of which Porete was not ignorant, with the discourse of secular *fin' amor* ("fine love," or courtly love) in order to expose in allegorical fashion a very daring mystical theology based on experiential knowledge, in a way that contrasts with more traditional forms of contemplation that had relied on the meditations on the Passion in order to trigger an affective response. The sophisticated and ambitious theology of *The Mirror*, probably composed in the rather loose beguine milieu of the town of Valenciennes, offers an account that subverted the prescribed mystical theologies offered in the secluded communities of twelfth-century monasticism. Indeed, whereas the latter built their system on the basis of a close anagogical reading of the biblical texts for the construction of a bridal mysticism that unambiguously depicts the soul's search for the divine beloved, the spousal mysticism of *The Mirror* blends bridal biblical mysticism and aspects of *fin' amor* literature to create the "mystique courtoise" (courtly forms of mysticism), also characteristic of the writings of Teresa of Avila (see Blumensfeld-Kosinski et al. 5–8).

The extent of the influence of the *Roman de la Rose* on Porete's *Mirror* appears both in the way dream-vision characteristics shape its general structure and allegorical personifications are given an important role in the soul's pursuit of spiritual love. The *Roman de la Rose*, written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung between 1237 and 1280, shows more concern for secular love and other matters than spiritual love, but the *Roman*'s influence on European medieval literature spread beyond its own area of interest. The emergence of *mystique courtoise*, as found in Porete, and the subsequent tradition of courtly devotion characteristic of Digulleville's cycle of three poems, *Pèlerinage de vie humaine, Pélerinage de l'âme, Pélerinage de Jésus Christ*, owed a lot to the *Roman* in terms of structural design, allegory and modes of discourses.[12]

Women and Textual Culture

Women's role as patrons and recipients of male-authored vernacular mystical theologies contributed to the invention of modes of discourses by authors eager to satisfy their specific needs. As Schirmer suggests for the Syon nuns in fifteenth-century England, women played a significant role in giving reading an agency in the construction of vernacular religious literature (345–376). That case can also be made for the composition of the anonymous *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1220), written at the request of three educated lay women, as well as for the sermons preached and finally written down by Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361), about which Margaretha Ebner (1291–1351), a member of the Friends of God, spoke most enthusiastically. Female agency set up a readerly culture that in turn played a key role in fashioning the agenda for vernacular mystical theologies in the late medieval period (Schirmer 354–357). It was importantly engaged in shaping vernacular mystical theology's innovative modes of discourses by

means of authorial agency or readerly agency, often taking place in a context of intimate familiarity with the author.

Vernacular mystical theology as a term defines a textual practice, one whose object is the codification of a contemplative experience or a contemplative system.[13] In many cases, experience and systematization of that experience for the possible use of apprentices in contemplation often go hand in hand. Richard Rolle (c. 1300–1349) (see Chapter 24, this volume) offered in his three Middle-English epistles a system based on degrees of love corresponding to a particular state of mind for the use of aspiring female contemplatives. While the object of these texts was the provision of a matrix from which the recipient could measure their own state of consciousness, they were not devoid of personal references in which Rolle positions himself as a significant intermediary between God and his female protégés. Elsewhere, Rolle encoded experience of his contemplative journey that served at a later stage to establish his reputation as a spiritual guide for the benefit of female beginners. Rolle and his female recipients stand as a good example of the gendered power relations that mark several vernacular mystical theologies. The marks of such tensions are textually embedded, often appearing as particular modes of discourses, some of them innovative to the extent of causing official ecclesiastical anxiety.

This opening up to the world of secular literature, and secular psychological structure, had a phenomenal effect on the way mystical theology developed in the west in the late medieval period and beyond. To come back briefly to Rolle, even if the Latin biblical practice of exegesis weighed heavily on the way in which he negotiated and conveyed in Middle English his own experience, he nevertheless showed awareness of the secular literary make-up of his female readers by shaping his material into a seductive epistolary attire that would appeal to readers of secular romances and lyrics. Similarly, both Marguerite Porete and Teresa of Avila's psychological make-up, as represented in their writings, disclose a self shaped by both religious and secular texts. As Slade shows most pertinently, novels of chivalry had a strong impact on the construction of Teresa's psychological make-up, which allowed for her visionary experiences to take place and be rendered textually (297–316).

New modes of discourses used for the expression of the contemplative experience combined Latinate literary techniques with secular ones, as in the case of St. John of the Cross's remarkable *Living Flame of Love*, the only piece that he wrote in response to a request, in this particular case from a devout laywoman, Doña Ana de Peñalosa, for whom he acted as a spiritual guide (see Chapter 28, this volume). The form of the commentary was used for further development and expression of the mystical thoughts that St. John of the Cross had embedded in the poetical part of the text. Such format, already put to successful effect in *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Spiritual Canticle*, combined different literary strands into a composite piece that conveyed St. John's experiential knowledge of the contemplative life in a most illuminating way.[14] In the case of St. John's *Living Flame of Love*, as in many other cases, women's agency in the production of vernacular theologies played a particular role, either as authors, patrons of male spiritual authors or recipients of texts.

Julian of Norwich's (c. 1342–c. 1413) own contribution to that particular textual culture as a vernacular author surpasses most other authorial modes of inventiveness

(see Chapter 24, this volume). The hermeneutical expertise demonstrated in *A Showing of Love* (also called the Short Text) and *A Revelation of Love* (also called the Long Text) is both an artistic and theological tour de force. The second, "long" text, in particular, shows the considerable sophistication and skill on the part of Julian in blending hermeneutic moments in with perfectly smooth prose that explicates the more experiential moments preceding it. The combination of these two modes of discourses within a flowing prose that even succeeds in preserving a sense of orality reached a level of perfection that still escapes complete explanation.

This aspect indicates yet again the individual dimension that characterizes vernacular mystical theology in contrast to the more communal dimension of its Latinate equivalent.[15] But individual excess may prevent the subtle development of contemplative feeling, as is sometimes said to be the case of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. late 1430s). However true that may be, this text invented the religious autobiography as a new mode of discourse for the English language and thus contributed to the broadening of Middle English textual culture as a whole.

The Book of Margery Kempe also points to the collaborative dimension of vernacular mystical textual culture. The composition of Margery's spiritual autobiography was the result of an intense and difficult collaboration between Margery and her scribes. Divine intervention apart, she was actively engaged in laying down readerly activities that consist in the reading aloud of mystical and devotional texts. The prologue to her book shows her to be in charge of the compositional process of her autobiography, with the scribe taking on at times a simple secretarial role. *The Book* is exemplary in the way it scrutinizes male/female collaboration. If other texts are less talkative on this aspect, it does not mean that they preclude assumptions about collaboration. On the contrary, brief references made by male-authored texts as to the role female recipients or textual subjects played in the compositional process hint at a more active role on their part in the manufacturing of texts for their edification and that of their spiritual confessors.

The *mulieres religiosae* movement of the Low Countries that began in the thirteenth century is a good case in point regarding the possible collaborative role played by these devout lay women whose life and visions were written down by male authors. *The Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek* (1246–1304), written down by the abbot Philip of Clairvaux who visited her in 1266/7, insists on her extraordinary and dramatic performance of the Passion, without making reference to her agency as part of the writing process. Recent scholarship shows, however, that Elisabeth, as probably other *mulieres religiosae*, was part of a complex network which involved other women, nobles and clerics, the latter often taking part in the writing process of their exemplary lives (Njus 285–317). In light of this new evidence in the case of the *mulieres religiosae*, it is no longer possible to live on with an image of saintly women completely oblivious of their external surrounding and only concerned about the state of their interior selves, as some of their *vitae* would like us to see them. That they were involved as part of a collaborative effort in the shaping of their external environment to create conditions conducive to contemplative feeling, and that they were engaged in one way or another in the compositional process designed to show their exemplarity cannot be put into doubt, even if it needs to be nuanced from case to case.

Vernacular Mystical Theology Does Politics

Watson makes a strong claim for the political dimension of English vernacular theologies, a point which comes across clearly when one considers texts such as William Langland's (written c. 1360–1387) or several texts engaged in the Wycliffite controversy.[16] This section considers whether this claim hold true for vernacular *mystical* theologies as well.

I would like to suggest that, even a text like the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (second half of the fourteenth century) is politically charged. The treatise provides the most sophisticated mystical system based on the Pseudo-Dionysian apophatic theology in the English language. It is unique in its in-depth exploration of negative theology and its prologue makes important claims about the kind of audience and the kind of inner disposition necessary for a proper understanding of its content. Similarly, Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love* compellingly explores a hermeneutics that might make theological sense of her series of sixteen visions, which are based on variations on the theme of the crucifixion. Although such texts do not strike one as political acts in the first place, a reading that relies on broader contextualization discloses a political agenda. One could, for instance, read the *Cloud*-author's recourse to the apophatic tradition as a response to late medieval trends in affective spirituality based on the Passion that may have been written in part in response to difficult religious and sociopolitical issues, such as heavy taxation, the plague, and the instability of the church.[17] Similarly, Julian's sophisticated intellective reflection on the very matter used for affective meditation offered much more daring ways of interpreting the Passion material than the ones encouraged by the official church: in the difficult religious climate of the late fourteenth century, they could have been read as threats to the church's official policies towards matters of personal devotion.

Other vernacular mystical theologies address the political much more directly, questioning secular and religious political institutions and their personnel with a view to improving their machinery. *The Dialogue of Catherine of Siena* (1347–1380), written towards the end of her life in a state of ecstasy, showcases the way in which visionary literature acts as authoritative conduit serving political aims. The personal visions of Catherine of Siena are indissociable from their political agenda. The personal and the public spheres weave into one another, producing a highly contentious and ambitious vernacular theology. One of Catherine's political aims was no less than the return of Pope Gregory XI from Avignon to Rome, which took place on January 17, 1377. Her involvement with papal affairs continued during the Great Schism of 1378, with Catherine of Siena vehemently supporting the Roman claimant, Urban VI. Her *Dialogue* and her large collection of letters disclose a captivating entanglement of the personal with the public, of a self claiming a direct contact with the divine and thus establishing an authority that was used as a political weapon in the international papal politics of her time.

Vernacular languages' liminality makes them ideal repositories for the contestation of Latinate ecclesiastical and humanistic cultures. The ecstasies and prophetic visions of Bridget of Sweden (c. 1303–1373), Margery Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1436), and Elisabeth Barton (c. 1506–1534), to mention just a few, challenged political decisions established

by secular or ecclesiastic institutions (Watt 15–80). This particular form of contestation outside of the channeled sphere and using a servile, feminized, and oppressed language may have been more acutely devastating than criticism coming out from within the spheres of power, in the Latin language. The case of Elizabeth Barton deserves special attention, as textual traces remain only in the charters and records that document the troubled political and religious times linked to Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Barton's revelations, which she claimed to have received directly from God, spoke against the divorce and positioned its claimant on the side of the Catholic church against the king. In her case, however, evidence of acquaintance and support from highly powerful political factions suggest that the liminal voice from without that usually characterizes mystical theologies in their contention against orthodoxy's political decisions needs to be considered carefully. Barton's involvement in matters of royal government suggests an affinity with politically influential individuals (Watt 51–80). Clearly, then, Barton's voice has been partly preserved because of its highly political intent, rather than its sophistication in offering an account of experiential knowledge of the divine. In that respect, such a text raises interesting questions as to the way in which a voice expressing a claim for direct encounter with the divine and wishing to couch it textually can be obscured by too serious political involvement.

Conclusion

The coming of age of vernacular languages as carriers of authoritative knowledge in the western world from the second half of the thirteenth century until their full maturity in the fifteenth century allowed the emergence of a new form of knowledge that would have a deep impact on the medieval mentality. While the wisdom and knowledge of the classical world in the fields of medical, scientific, and philosophical thought were passed on from Latin into vernacular languages, the Latin mystical tradition was appropriated and transformed for the creation of a new theology based on experience and strongly indebted to, and dependent upon, vernacular languages' universal reach.

The invention of vernacular mystical theology in the thirteenth century marked the beginning of a new religious culture and the democratization of mystical aspirations. It unlocked doors for a large number of male and female individuals who had been excluded from access to Latin culture tools, and it made possible the deep exploration of their interior landscape. The social, political, psychological and religious impact that this discovery had on western culture makes it as momentous an event as the discovery and exploration of the New World a few centuries later.

Notes

1   See Gillespie, "Vernacular Theology," 401–420, who offers a good summary of the current situation. For example, focus on German devotional literature as literature and theology predates the use of the term by McGinn and Watson and suggests ways in which various European vernaculars have been studied independently of the suggestions made by the latter.

2   McGinn's ambitious and outstanding seven-volume series, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, covers a span that makes it impossible to pay specific and detailed attention to vernacular mystical theology in particular.

3   Gillespie's perspective on the post-Arundelian period, paying much attention to decisions that took place at the Council of Constance in 1418 and their effect on the English church, could provide useful information when applied as well to the continent; see Gillespie, *Looking into Holy Books*; see also Gillespie and Ghosh (eds.), *After Arundel*.

4   For the use of the expression "contemplative feeling," which I consider to be interchangeable with "mystical feeling," see Renevey, "1215–1349: Texts"; for a discussion on the topic of contemplation, see Watson, "Introduction"; for a discussion of the role of affective meditations as part of the history of emotion, see McNamer *Affective Meditation*, 1–21.

5   The original Italian text is found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Canonici Italian 174.

6   For a compelling demonstration of this point, see McNamer *Affective Meditation*, 86–115.

7   For a detailed account of the gendered nature of compassion, see McNamer *Affective Meditation*, 119–149.

8   For a better understanding of the roles played by the Canons Regular from the Abbey of St.-Victor in Paris in shaping medieval psychology, see the discussions on the writings of Hugh and Richard of St.-Victor, and Thomas Gallus in Chapter 17 of this volume.

9   See for instance, Newman. In Blumensfeld-Kosinski 105–123.

10   For an extensive discussion of Cistercian and Victorine mysticism, see McGinn *The Growth*, 158–418.

11   For a discussion of the anxiety vernacular texts generated on the part of the official church, see Pedersen 185–208.

12   See Boulton. In Blumensfeld-Kosinski 125–144.

13   Although I agree with Crasson that medieval theatre's dramatization of the whole of the Bible is highly theological and should therefore be part of the corpus of vernacular theologies, I nevertheless exclude it from the narrower corpus of vernacular mystical theologies; see Crassons 95–102.

14   For an English translation of St. John's writings, see The Collected Works, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez; "The Living Flame of Love" translated by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez is also available online at The Living Flame of Love (5 July 5, 2011), www.karmel.at/ics/john/fl.html; see also Barro in Leonard (ed.) 3–24.

15   The idea for modes of discourses is borrowed from Kemp 233–257.

16   See Watson, "Cultural Changes," 127–137; for further discussions on the political dimension of vernacular theologies, see especially the chapters by Watson, Waters and Poor in Somerset and Watson (eds.).

17   For an extensive discussion of affective meditations, see Sarah McNamer *Affective Meditation*.

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The Social Scientific Study of Christian Mysticism

Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and Zhuo Chen

The social scientific study of mysticism can be said, like much of social science, to have a long history but a short past. Much of this depends upon how mysticism is defined. For purposes of this essay, we can contrast two definitions of mysticism. One, championed by such scholars as Bernard McGinn, focuses upon mysticism as an immediate and direct sense of the presence of God. As such, it clearly favors theistic traditions such as Christianity in which the presence of God is central. The other identifies mysticism with altered states of consciousness centered upon experiences of the dissolution of the empirical ego and the realization of union with a larger reality, which may but need not be identified as God. Those who favor the sense of presence of God seek to correct what they perceive to be an overemphasis upon experiences of dissolution and union that, they argue, have played a minimal role in the history of theistic traditions, including the Christian mystical tradition. McGinn goes so far as to state that if the focus is upon experiences of dissolution and union, then "there are actually so few mystics in the history of Christianity that one wonders why Christians used the qualifier 'mystical' so often . . . and eventually created the term 'mysticism' in the 17th century" (xvi).

These contrasting definitional options will determine to a large extent how one approaches the study of mysticism, which has a dual history. On the one hand, mysticism, identified as a "direct communion with God" (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 731), can be seen as a universal phenomenon that characterizes all theistic traditions (McGinn xv; Troeltsch 1981/1912: 732). It incorporates the widest variety of experiences indicative of contact with the "supersensuous itself" (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 283). On the other hand, in the narrow, technical sense of the term to be discussed below, "mystics" can emerge independent of a faith tradition, whether theistic or not.

Space limitations require us to use a rather narrow focus as we explore the social scientific study of mysticism. We are helped by what remains one of the most useful

surveys of theories of mysticism, provided by McGinn in his appendix to volume 1 of his ongoing study of the history of western Christian mysticism, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (265–343). Although, according to McGinn himself, it is an "eclectic and personal view" (266), his Appendix nevertheless remains authoritative in many respects given that we accept his claim that, "There is no general survey of modern theories of mysticism" (265). McGinn divides his survey of modern theories of mysticism into three broad approaches: theological, philosophical, and comparativist and psychological. Obviously these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and if they are to be faulted up front it is primarily for the comparative approach, which includes in a scant three and a half pages a brief discussion of the work of a few psychologists who McGinn sees as having "combined an interest in altered states of consciousness with broad humanist concerns about the place in modern culture" (341). Such a selection is curious insofar as it focuses upon social scientists who have neglected a mysticism of the presence of God for one based upon altered states of consciousness, including experiences of ego dissolution and unity. This would almost assure the continuation of what McGinn rightly bemoans as the "unrealized conversation" (343) between psychologists and those involved in the history and theory of mystical traditions.

Our effort in this chapter will be to focus upon mysticism, first as a sense of the presence of God, and then more specifically as an experience of union and dissolution that need not be identified with God nor with a given theistic tradition. It is this fact that allows the social scientist to empirically identify what is perhaps an unintended, if not unanticipated, legacy of what otherwise can be identified as the Christian mystical tradition – namely a mystical common core regardless of religious interpretations.

It is important to distinguish the common core thesis from perennialism. The identification of a common core is focused upon a mystic dissolution of self and unity that can be experienced commonly by individuals regardless of their religious associations or trainings. In contrast, the commonality argued by perennialists is focused upon the unity of *beliefs*, including ethical teachings and metaphysical positions held by different religions. The major difference is thus that the common core thesis is based upon experience, and perennialism on interpretations. The position that perennialism holds true is rejected by common core theorists, who agree with the diversity of socially constructed religious framing, but who also believe that a universal human experience can escape from such a framing.

Beginning the Conversation: A Brief History of the Debates over Mysticism

If the conversation envisioned by McGinn is to be realized, it must occur between social scientists and scholars who do not commit a priori to what Douglas V. Porpora has identified as the dominant methodology in sociology: methodological atheism. In his extended discussion of Peter Berger's sociology of religion, Porpora forcefully denies Berger's claim that "every inquiry that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based upon methodological atheism" (Berger 100). While Berger speaks to sociologists, he also echoes a century-old sentiment of empirically oriented psycholo-

gists. This was first associated by Theodore Flournoy, who in 1903 argued for the methodical exclusion of the transcendent in the then emerging empirical psychology of religion. Likewise, James Leuba's widely cited study of mysticism in the 1920s made this methodological exclusion specific, noting that the phenomena that characterize the mystical life are explicable "*in the same sense, to the same extent*, and *by the same general scientific principles* as any other fact of consciousness" (Leuba ix, emphasis in original). In simple terms, it has widely assumed that empirical oriented social scientists cannot explore any contribution God might make in explaining experiences of God.

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), German Protestant theologian and philosopher of religion, early identified this as the danger of science being committed to the metaphysical inadmissibility of the objects believed in by religion. The conversation McGinn envisions was actually begun in Troeltsch's interest in the scientific study of religious experience, which he associated with William James precisely because James provided a rich descriptive psychology that did not deny the possibility that part of the experience of God comes from God. Roger Johnson notes that Troeltsch sought to defend a science of religion in which the focus was upon the mediation between an actualization of the religious a prior with the psychical phenomena revealed in the variety of religious experiences studied by William James (449–476). Whereas James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) had focused upon the psychology of the individual and crafted his lectures to culminate in the mystical experiences of the solitary individual, which he saw as the "root and centre" (301) of personal religious experience, Troeltsch in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* (1912) focused upon the social embeddings of mysticism.

Troeltsch was largely uncritical of the methods by which James identified the variety of religious experience. James' definition of religious experience clearly revealed his sympathy for the extreme forms of the religious virtuoso. James defined religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men, in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (34, emphasis in original). James's clarification of what he meant by "divine" makes the case for the near-universal application of this concept. As he saw it, the divine is a felt presence that is "such a primal reality as the individual feels compelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest" (39). For James, religious experience distinctively separates what is perceived to be *religious* from the vast domain of experience.

Troeltsch found in James room for religious pluralism in terms of experiences that, when socially embedded, uniquely define the great faith traditions' experience of God. According to Troeltsch, religious traditions define the distinctively religious for the individual; their truth claims must therefore be assessed by something other than their empirical psychological manifestation to be considered religious experiences. Neither Troeltsch nor James thought it fruitful to define religious experiences (except for the mysticism of dissolution and unity) by their inherent characteristics. For both, whether an experience is religious or not depends upon the interpretation of the experience as it is appropriated within one's faith tradition. As Troeltsch noted, "Hence the primitive religious fact itself in which experience and the expression of the experience are simply identical is never mystical" (731). Interpretations provide meanings not inherently obvious to those who stand outside the tradition; these meanings provide the context

for identifying any particular episode as religious experience within a particular tradition in which an isolated identification of "mystic" (in a more generic sense) might not be acknowledged.

Two Contemporary Approaches Assessing Mysticism: From Text-Reports to Scales

If philosophers and historians insist upon the fact that written texts are the major medium by which mysticism is to be understood, they then neglect the fact that modern social science can easily identify persons who report experiencing the presence of God. In fact, this latter methodological approach provides social and psychological correlates which should prove of great interest to scholars who have restricted themselves to text analysis, and which could therefore form the basis for fruitful dialogue. We will cite three simple empirical examples.

In 1963, in their initial sampling of churches in the greater San Francisco area, Charles Glock and Rodney Stark (157) asked persons a question that anticipated McGinn's preference for the distinctive mark of mystical experience a sense of the presence of God in their empirical research. They asked the specific question, "Have you ever as an adult had the feeling that you were somehow in the presence of God?" With a sample size just under 3,000 respondents (2,871), 72 percent answered "yes." Not surprisingly, the majority of religiously committed and institutionally involved persons answered "yes." Only 20 percent of all Protestants sampled ($n = 2,326$) and 25 percent of all Catholics sampled ($n = 545$) answered "no."

In 1968, Glenn Vernon (219–229) isolated a small sample of 85 persons who indicated "none" when asked about their religious commitment. In this sample of "religious nones," 25 percent nevertheless answered the Glock and Stark question affirmatively. Thus, even among those with no institutional religious commitment, a significant minority of adults reported experiencing a sense of God's presence. This indicates that one need not have a specific religious identification to report an experience of the presence of God.

More recently, in a longitudinal study (1991) of religious development in Finland, Kalevi Tamminen asked, "Have you at times felt that God is particularly close to you?" He found a steady decline by grade level (and hence age) in the percentage of students reporting experiences of nearness to God.

From these three simple citations we can note three well established empirical facts: (l) devoutly religiously committed persons are more likely to report a feeling of the sense of God's presence than the less devout and those who have no religious identification; (2) this declines with age in cultures where secularization is common, such as in Scandinavian countries; (3) yet even among those without a religious commitment, a significant minority of person report a sense of God's presence.

A second methodological approach to identifying the sense of God's presence is to use scales constructed to specifically measure such reports. A scale is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. One such approach to measuring mystical and numinous experiences has

been to operationalize and quantify what we can call the "literary exemplar approach." This approach asks individuals to respond to instances of the report of mystical experiences selected from examples published in literature, including both autobiographical and poetic examples. McGinn identifies this approach with M. Laski's work, which he views as "marred by the vague and unprofessional nature of her original questionnaire" (McGinn 340). Reviews of several literary approaches to assess mysticism are readily available (Hood et al. 103–106).

The literary approach influenced Ralph Hood to systematize Laski's procedure in constructing the Religious Experience Episodes Measure (REEM). Hood selected fifteen experiences from James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, presented them in booklet form, and had respondents indicate the degree to which they had ever had an experience like each of these. John Rosegrant modified the REEM by rephrasing the elegant nineteenth-century English and reducing the number of items from 15 to 10. The advantage of the REEM over Laski's questionnaire is that standardized experiences are presented to research subjects, whose responses can be quantified by summing the degree of similarity of their own experiences to those described in the REEM. An example of a REEM item is,

> God is more real to me than any thought or person. I feel his presence, and I feel it more as I live in closer harmony with his laws. I feel him in the sunshine, or rain, and my feelings are best described as awe mixed with delirious restfulness. (Burris 222)

Thus, in addition to focusing on the reports or texts of past mystics, the empirical study of mysticism seeks to identify – by means of open-ended response to specific questions, survey responses to specific question, and specifically worded scales – persons who report mystical experience as a sense of the presence of God (Hood et al. 338–370).

Empirical studies using the above forms of assessment converge on three robust findings. First, the report of a sense of the presence of God is common among the religious devout but is not excluded from a minority of persons having no religious identification. The fact of mystical experiences outside of faith traditions, while perhaps only characteristic of modernity and post-modernity, opens up interesting possibilities for dialogue among scholars of mysticism who have yet to speak to one another, as we will discuss more fully below.

Second, the sense of the presence of God can be facilitated by a variety of procedures that can trigger this sense, leaving open the ontological possibility that this sense of God is not simply socially or psychologically constructed. This assures the value of a dialogue among theological, philosophical, comparativist, and empirical approaches to the study of mysticism.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, within faith traditions those motivated by devout beliefs consistently report a sense of the presence of God, while those motivated by extrinsic reasons to participate in religion are much less likely to report such experiences. This may appear to empirically substantiate what McGinn implies in his review of Troeltsch's theory of mysticisms: "Perhaps there is more to mystical religion than the conscious insistence on the primacy of direct religious experience" (271). There is.

Troeltsch on Church, Sect, and Mysticism

In the *Social Teachings of the Christian Church*, Troeltsch developed a three-part typology likely derived from two independent dichotomies that Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of the sociology of religion, had elaborated in his widely influential *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). As William Swatos (1976) has emphasized, Weber had two typologies: church-sect and mysticism-asceticism. Troeltsch's single typology of church-sect-mysticism was itself a modification intended both to simplify and to clarify his friend Weber's dual typologies. The extent to which Troeltsch's single typology is compatible with Weber's dual typologies is a matter of dispute among scholars. Theodore Steeman (1975) argues that Troeltsch's treatment of church–sect–mysticism at least approximates Weber's intent with his dual typology. The important issue is simply that both Troeltsch and Weber sought to explore the historical and sociological determinants of mysticism as one distinct ideal type of religious formation.

Troeltsch's wider understanding of mysticism

The crucial point for our empirical concerns is that mystical experience, according to Troeltsch, was contextually dependent upon claims for it as the objective realization of a truth less ineffable than that contained in sacred texts and expressed in sacred liturgy, whether associated with the church and its emphasis on the objective realization of grace and redemption (in Christian mysticism), or with the sect form of religious organization and its emphasis on law rather than grace (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 193). Thus, as Steven Katz has argued, mysticism is often conservative – expressing itself within a tradition, rather than standing outside or opposing it. In this sense, Troeltsch argued that mysticism is simply the inward appropriation of a direct religious experience of the sense of the presence of God (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 730). Thus, persons are not "mystics" but rather devout believers expressing intense piety. From this perspective, mysticism is a phenomenon found in all religious traditions and includes the widest variety of experiences – a phenomenon that Troeltsch and James both admired, even when they may have rejected the belief systems in which they were embedded. In the widest sense, for Troeltsch, mysticism is simply a demand for an inward appropriation of a direct inward and present religious experience (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 730). Religious mysticism takes the objective characteristics of its tradition for granted and either supplements them with a profound inwardness, or reacts against them as it demands to bring them back "into the living process" (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 731).

We identify this as "religious mysticism" for two reasons. It is a mysticism that, according to both Troeltsch and Louis Bouyer (1980), is found within all religious systems as a universal phenomenon. Thus, as an empirical fact, mysticism entered Christianity partly from *within* insofar as Christianity entails the same logical form as all traditions relative to Troeltsch's first type of mysticism. At the same time, Troeltsch's second type of mysticism (to be discussed below) enters Christianity partly from *without* – i.e. from other sources that were eagerly accepted by Christianity. Concentrating

among the purely interior and emotional side of religious experience, religious mysticism creates a "spiritual" interpretation of every objective side of religion, so that mystics typically stay within their tradition.

Troeltsch's theory, as developed in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, is most often discussed in terms of the distinction between church (and its tendencies toward universal acceptance) and sect (and its demanding and exclusive criteria of membership). The empirical study of the church/sect distinction is extensive and beyond the scope of this chapter (Hood et al. 244–287). As noted above, however, Troeltsch was clearly using an expanded typology in which he identified a third type – mysticism. The problem is that the term "mysticism" is misleading when identified in the singular within Troeltsch's typology. There are in fact two mysticisms in Troeltsch's view: a wider mysticism inherent in any religious tradition (discussed above), and a narrow, technical mysticism that can and historically does divorce itself from tradition (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 734–738). As McGinn and Troeltsch insist, self-identified "mystics" are a more recent historical phenomenon. It thus behooves social scientists to develop a theory of how mysticism became divorced from specific faith traditions. Once again, Troeltsch provides us with a reasonable empirical model with his focus upon two mysticisms.

Troeltsch's narrower understanding of mysticism

Troeltsch was popularized among North American scholars by H. Richard Niebuhr, especially in his *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (first published in 1929 and thus antedating the English translation of Troeltsch's text by two years). Niebuhr dropped Troeltsch's third type, mysticism, and as a result subsequent theorizing and empirical research on church-sect theory largely ignored mysticism. Thus, as William Garrett (1975) has noted, mysticism has experienced wholehearted neglect at the hands of sociological investigators. Similarly, psychologists, although they have uncovered considerable empirical data on mysticism, have neglected to develop a historically grounded theory. In short, whereas historians have a relevant theory, psychologists have the relevant data, and they must learn to converse.

Within Troeltsch are two mysticisms. The first, what above we have called "religious mysticism," is that of the sense of the presence of God defined and elaborated within specific traditions such as Christianity. The second emerges when the focus is upon the dissolution of ego and an experience of greater unity that is the hallmark of the "narrow, technical concentrated sense" of mysticism (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 734). This second kind of mysticism need not be expressed in either church or sect, or in any specific religious form. William Parsons refers to this as "unchurched mysticism" in *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling* (15). These two forms of mysticism, one churched and the other unchurched, must be clearly distinguished – something social scientists have failed to do.

Troeltsch's "narrower, technically concentrated sense" of mysticism has become, in principle, independent from institutional forms of religion and is even contrasted with it. This narrower, technical mysticism gives rise to what Troeltsch called "spiritual

religion." It claims to be the true inner principle of all religious faith. It "realizes that it is an independent religious principle; it sees itself as the real universal heart of all religion, of which the various myth-forms are merely the outer garment" (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 734). It is not a mysticism of inward appropriation of a direct experience of the presence of God but one focused upon "union with God, deification and self-annihilation" (734). In summarizing this mysticism, Troeltsch notes:

> This technical mysticism in the narrow sense, with its own philosophy of religion, has also appeared in various religious spheres with a remarkable similarity of form, in Indian Brahmanism and its repercussion in Buddhism, in the Sufism of the Parsees and of Persian Muslims, in the neo-Platonism of the Greeks, in the varied syncretism of late antiquity, which is known as Gnosticism. In the guise of Platonism, Neo- Platonism and Gnosticism it presented itself to the Early Church, which seized it eagerly as a scientific foundation for its own religious doctrine. (736)

We refer to this type of mysticism "spiritual" religion because it need not be identified with a sense of the presence of God, and indeed may deny the reality of God. It is focused upon the experience of dissolution and union with a reality that remains ultimately ineffable. This kind of mysticism breaks away from institutional religion, which it disdains, and has no impulse toward social organization at all (800). This narrow, technical mysticism is distanced from both church and sect, since "Under its auspices only fluid and completely personally limited groups can assemble. What remains in them of cult, dogma, connection with history tends to become so fluid it disappears" (993). It accepts no constraint or community other than ones that are self-selected and self-realized. It is the basis of what Forman (1990; 1998; 1999) and Parsons (1999) identify as a "perennial psychology" rooted in mysticism that now allows one to be identified as a "mystic," rather than as a Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, or Protestant. It is what many today profess to be "spirituality" as opposed to "religion" and is identified with the narrow rather than the wider sense of Troeltsch's two mysticisms. It is to this narrow and technical sense of mysticism that we can continue realizing our conversation between the empirical study of and the history and theory of mysticism.

The Common Core Thesis

The common core thesis of William James

Elsewhere we have argued for reading James' treatment of mysticism in the *Varieties* as an example of the unity or common core thesis (Hood 2008). The unity or common core thesis is the view that both within and outside of the great faith traditions is an experience of ego dissolution and union that is essentially identical, regardless of interpretation. That James accepted this narrow, technical sense of mysticism is evident in a statement that echoes Troeltsch's similar framing of the issue noted above:

> In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian Mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity

which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates language, and they do not grow old. (James 332)

With respect to the narrower technical sense of mysticism, both James and Troeltsch appear to endorse two assumptions central to the unity or common core thesis: it implies that a distinction can be made between experience and its interpretation, and it suggests that, for at least some linguistic descriptions, an underlying uniform experience cuts across language differences. This position has been most systematically developed by Walter Stace (1960) under the rubric of the "common core thesis" and is the basis of the most commonly used empirical measure of mysticism, the Mysticism Scale, which has been used in numerous studies since first developed more than a quarter century ago by Ralph W. Hood in 1975.

Two major contending perspectives in the contemporary empirical study of mysticism exist in the west. One, championed by Wayne Proudfoot (1985) and several scholars who have rallied around Katz, denies the distinction between experience and interpretation. Basically, their crucial claim is that there can be no unmediated experiences, an assumption that continues to affirm the dominance of Kant's philosophy in contemporary psychology and among the first generation of post-modern philosophers. The other perspective is championed by those who have rallied around Robert K. Forman (1990; 1998; 1999).[1] This camp does not accept neo-Kantian thought uncritically and is heavily influenced by eastern philosophy. It also refuses to accept reductionist explanations of mysticism once common in classical psychoanalysis. It claims that an experience of "pure consciousness" offers evidence in favor of a direct, unmediated experience of reality acceptable in many eastern philosophical systems and in forms of what Denys Turner refers to as "apophatic anthropology" in which "an apophaticism of language about God and an apophaticism of language about the 'self' are obviously intimately connected" (6). This is the case even when the concern is to remove the discussion of mysticism from a focus upon mystical experience or what Turner refers to as experientialism. However, it is precisely the reading of mystics in experiential terms that we champion here in empirical support of what James explored as but one variety of religious experience, one properly identified with Troeltsch's more narrow and technical sense of mysticism, or what Stace identifies as the common core thesis.

G. William Barnard (1997) argues that James is not an advocate of the common core or unity thesis. However, the issue is easily settled if we recognize that James, like Troeltsch, identifies two mysticisms. The first is understood in a broad sense, in which an almost infinite range of experiences are, in Ann Taves' terms, deemed religious, or in James' terms simply part of a "mystical group" (303). They include Troeltsch's enumeration of glossolalia, frenzy, ecstatic states, erotic and other, and innumerable emotional states and practices which share in common an interpretive frame that makes even the handling of deadly serpents an inwardly appropriated mystical experience (Hood and Williamson). The extent of such experiences is so broad as to defy treatment here (see Hood et al.: ch. 9 for reviews).

Nevertheless, James also identified a second mysticism, very much like Troeltsch's narrow sense of mysticism, and in that sense he can be read as a defender of the common core or unity thesis. Porpora has noted "James's presumption was that religious experients were genuinely experiencing something real; the question was what" (71). In terms of Troeltsch's more narrow technical sense of mysticism, James' answer is succinct: "In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness" (332). In seeking to explore the personal reality of the report of such states, James provides many reports, but perhaps none more clearly than that reported by the English poet John Symonds (James 306). David Wulff cites this as one of his three examples of mysticism. Its abbreviated form as a REEM item is as follows:

> I would suddenly feel the mood coming when I was at church, or with people, or reading, but only when my muscles were relaxed. It would irresistibly take over my mind and will, last what seems like forever, and disappear in a way that resembled waking from anesthesia. One reason that I disliked this kind of trance was that I could not describe it to myself; even now I can't find the right words. It involved the disappearance of space, time, feeling, and all things that I call myself. As ordinary consciousness disappeared, the sense of underlying or essential consciousness grew stronger. At last nothing remained but a pure, abstract self. (Burris 224)

The REEM allows both mysticisms to remain empirically distinct but nonetheless mixed together in this single measure. Thus the REEM has not been used in studies empirically separating Troeltsch's two mysticisms. Insofar as mysticism is assessed by the REEM, the distinction between experience and interpretation remains, with experiences descriptive of ego dissolution and union mixed with experiences more descriptive of the sense of God's presence. Experience descriptive of ego dissolution and unity may or may not be identified with God and are unlikely to exhaust the meaning of God as embedded in theistic faith traditions (James 407). However, its occurrence both within and outside faith traditions surely is one of the empirical indicators of something more that empirical psychologists and scholars of mysticism should converse about. As an example, the noted Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, speaking of his own experience, stated:

> Now from my own unforgettable experience I know well that there is a state in which the bounds of personal nature of life seem to have fallen away from us and we experience an undivided unity. But I do not know what the soul willingly imagines and is indeed bound to imagine (mine too once did) – that in this I had attained a union with the primal being or godhead. This is an exaggeration no longer permitted to the responsible understanding. (Buber 24)

The isolation of the narrow form of mysticism identified by Troeltsch also permitted James to assert an ideal or "unanimous type of experience" (336). This ideal type was kept true to form by excluding mysticism in Troeltsch's wider sense, which, James acknowledged, had historically characterized religious mysticism. James noted that, if this wider sense of mysticism is acknowledged, the "supposed unanimity largely disappears" (336). It remained for Stace to give a focused identification to this clearly identifi-

able narrow mysticism, which he labeled "introvertive mysticism." And Hood and his colleagues keep it true to form by empirical means.

The common core thesis of Stace and Hood

Stace initially suggested the common phenomenological components of mystical experience, which were operationalized by Hood in the Mysticism Scale (M Scale). The M Scale measures eight facets, all identified by Stace as part of the common core to mystical experiences. While some have seen this identification as a mere "rag-bag of empirical features" (Findley), Hood and his colleagues have empirically demonstrated this is far from the case.

Central to Stace's concern is the experience of ego dissolution and its merger into a larger unity. This is identified by Stace as "introvertive mysticism" and by James' as simply "MORE of the same quality" (401, emphasis in original). He also notes, "It is when we treat of the experience of 'union' with it that their [mystics'] differences appear most clearly" (401). Further he leaves open the possibility of dialogue with philosophers and theologians in asking the question that easily follows from the empirical identification of the report of this "more experience": Is such a "more" merely our own notion or does it really exist? Stace notes that the "more" is part of the experience and *not* of the interpretation of experience (153–154).

With the exception of paradoxicality, Hood operationalized all eight facets of Stace's common core theory. Besides *Ego dissolution* these include: *Timelessness/Spacelessness*, a sense of being outside spatiotemporal limitations; *Unity*, a unifying vision of the world as one; *Inner Subjectivity*, a perception of inner awareness in all beings; *Positive Affect*, blissful feelings that accompany mystical experience; *Sacredness*, a sense of the holy; *Noetic Quality*, a cognitive advancement in understanding the world; and *Ineffability*, the alleged inexplicability of mystic experience.

Empirical studies from several independent investigators employing the M Scale further confirm that one can empirically separate the report of minimal experiential factors (such as ego dissolution and unity) from interpretative factors (such as noetic and sacredness). Further studies have supported Stace's three-factor structure of these eight experiential facets, in which introvertive mysticism is separated from extrovertive mysticism and both of these from an interpretation factor. *Introvertive* mysticism was composed of ego loss and timeless/spaceless, denoting an inward unitary consciousness beyond time and space; *extrovertive* mysticism was framed by unity and inner subjectivity, implying an outward merging with the wholeness of all existence; *interpretation* incorporated positive affect, sacredness, noetic quality, and ineffability that qualified both types of mysticism.

Notwithstanding these empirical supports for Stace's philosophical scheme, a noticeable discrepancy lies in the placement of the items denoting ineffability. Stace's model places them within the interpretive factor, while Hood associates them with introvertive experience. For Stace, an ineffable experience is featured by a perceived logical ambivalence that disqualifies the meaningful use of language. In Hood's view, however, the state of ego loss forsakes any individual narrator, thus making the experience

unconceivable. Although both ways of conceptualizing ineffability apply to Iranian Muslims, Hood's model is often superior for American Christian samples, and Stace's model performs better in Israeli Jews. In a sample of Tibetan Buddhist adults, confirmatory factor analyses – a statistical technique that evaluates the degree to which a theoretical supposition of a construct reproduces empirical measures of that construct – suggested statistical model fit and superiority of three-factor models (cf. Chen, et al.).

An advantage to having an empirical indicator of mysticism linked to the scholarly literature that at least acknowledges the possibility of the two mysticisms identified by both Troeltsch and James is that it allows an objective comparison between reports of mystical experience among different person and various faith traditions using the M Scale. Further, it allows for the empirical identification of triggers of this experience, based not only upon self-reports of their spontaneous occurrence but also under experimental and quasi-experimental conditions designed to facilitate the report of the occurrence of such experiences. There is a relatively large literature using the M Scale that establishes several empirical claims – claims which need to be included in the unrealized conversation with scholars who have focused upon mystical texts embedded within various cultural conditions, as if mystical texts were all we had.

In addition, we have contemporary individuals who report experiences that are very similar to those embedded within mystical texts. Here several firmly established empirical findings are worthy of note. Perhaps most significant are the findings that experiences of ego dissolution and unity are common among the intrinsically devout in many traditions (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim), but it also occurs among individuals in many cultures who identify as spiritual but not religious. Reports of mystical experience among the religiously devout and the spiritually non-religious differ in triggers of the experience, but not in the objectively measured nature of the report of mystical experience. Thus, the religiously devout and the spiritually non-religious report similar frequencies of mystical experiences and are united in opposition to the extrinsically religious in any tradition who are less likely to report such experiences. Those who report such experiences are open to experience and more likely to be susceptible to entering altered states of consciousness. Such reports are clearly related to gender, with females reporting higher rates of such experience, regardless of culture. Furthermore, the religious devout are more likely to score higher on the meaningful interpretation of such experiences than others without a faith tradition.

Of particular relevance to the unrealized conversation is the ability to use the M Scale in studies to trigger mysticism. Such studies parallel religious traditions that have focused upon spiritual exercises to facilitate mystical experience, historically more common in Catholic than in Protestant traditions. However, in studies done primarily with Protestants rather than Catholics, it is well established that such experiences can be facilitated by meditation or prayer situations, especially when using enhanced isolation techniques, such as isolation tanks. They also can be facilitated by the manipulation of anticipatory set and actual setting stress in solitary nature experiences. Perhaps most controversial is the fact they can be facilitated by chemicals, especially when set and setting are appropriate and the participants are either explicitly religious or have an expressed interest in spirituality (for review see Hood et al. 331–380).

The fact that mystical experience can be studied empirically in contemporary persons who report such experiences adds to the unrealized conversation additional voices that must be heard. That mystical experience is historically and culturally embedded does not mean that common aspects cannot be isolated, any more than the fact that languages are historically and culturally contingent means that there cannot be a deep structure that can be identified across languages, even though people speak particular languages and no one speak simply "language."

A common confusion offered by critics of the common core thesis is well stated by Belzen:

> He [Hood] designed an instrument to answer the question, tested it out, and lo and behold, a common core shows up – *but* the instrument was based on a conceptualization of mysticism, by Stace (1960), that *presupposes* a common core. So: Hood got a common core out of the empiricist's hat (the M-scale), so to speak, but only after he put it (Stace's theory of a common core) in there before. (Hood et al. 217–218, emphases in original)

However, this is precisely where the unrealized conversation should begin. Neither Troeltsch nor James presupposed a common core in the focus upon ego dissolution and unity. Neither did Stace: (1) Stace utilized a catholicity of cross-cultural derived phenomenological descriptions of mystical experiences, admittedly to extract from culture and history a possible common core; (2) Hood created a scale that reliably measures Stace's common core; (3) in a variety of cultures as diverse as Scandinavia, India, Iran, Tibet and the United States, individuals respond to the M Scale with patterns or clusters that are consistent across cultures; (4) Introvertive mysticism emerges as a distinct phenomenon that can form various family resemblances based upon the empirically ordering of Stace's specific common core criteria.

Thus, the outcome of numerous empirical studies with the M Scale supports, including many with independent empirical investigators, empirically confirm that the experience of ego dissolution and unity can be distinguished explicitly from historical and cultural contextual interpretation. These data most generally suggested that the social construction of mystical experience makes sense within boundaries that both accept James' focused empiricism on Troeltsch's narrow mysticism and allow for the almost infinite range of interpretations of other mysticisms that form the religious experiences embedded in various traditions. We thus can accept Troeltsch's implied mandate, "We do not stop with nothing more than 'varieties of religious experience' which is the result of James' method" (288). As Rufus Jones, an earlier scholar of mysticism noted, "The most refined mysticism, the most exalted spiritual experience is *partly* a product of the social and intellectual environment in which the personal life of the mystic has formed and matured"(p. xxxiv, italics in original). However, that part of experience is historically nurtured does not mean that something eludes and escapes a totalizing influence. What is needed is a conversation, as yet unrealized, between those who can mediate between the Scylla of social constructions of experience deemed religious within the various faith traditions and the Charybdis an irreducible common core identified as introvertive mysticism that can free itself from religious tradition and become associated with those that are spiritual but not religious.

Note

1   Within the social sciences two competing views can readily be identified. One, often identified as "constructionists," is heavily influenced by Kant's philosophy and argues that all experiences are mediated and hence there is no direct access to reality. Depending on emphasis, mediation may be via culture, language, or neurophysiological processes or some interactive combination of all of these (Katz 1977; 1983; 1992). The other view, identified with "common corers," argue that there are unmediated experiences of reality and assert that mediation applies to the interpretation of experience, not to the experience itself (e.g., Forman works cited).

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Neuroscience

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Introduction: The Perspective from the Clinic

I confess to a sense of unease about writing this chapter. Quite simply, what kind of discussion can take place between Christian mysticism and neuroscience? My own field, academic neurosurgery, has been influenced profoundly by modern neuroscience in a very positive way. Advances in medical imaging, diagnosis, and treatment of a variety of neurosurgical conditions have occurred in the context of collaborative efforts between neuroscientists in the laboratory and neurosurgeons and neurologists in the clinic. At the same time, using scientific trials and studies that acknowledge the wide gaps in our knowledge, we clinicians struggle to document the effect therapy has on patients without disturbing the relationship between patient and physician. In caring for patients, we encounter and experience added dimensions of complexity. The patient experiences the certainty and uncertainty of disease in an entirely real, personal, and subjective manner. In a helpful article, Mark Edwards, a scholar, patient, and author, observes that "the natural sciences and some social sciences, with their commitment to distance or even detachment, cannot satisfactorily address the dimension of existential depth such experience and questions entail" (20).

Neuroscience differs in that it observes and measures with a distance and detachment that demands a kind of scientific rigor that denies alternative interpretations. While we are surrounded by mystery, neuroscience views mystery mostly as problem. Religious belief is viewed in that same way: "why did humans invent religion in the course of evolution?" Answers adhere to theoretical constructs that "fit" into the mold of natural selection: advantage to the species, communal strength, etc. In short, neuroscience's approach to any "existential depth" – and most certainly to any claims of mystical experience – is by definition bound by the nature and development of its questions and methods, as well as by the perspectives of its theories. Within this context,

astounding progress in neuroscience has led to a resurgence of scientific positivism and a materialist ethos.

Indeed, neuroscience poses "a far more fundamental challenge than evolutionary biology to many religions" (Farah and Murphy 1168) insofar as it (or at least some of its practitioners) understands most religions to claim the existence of a truth outside the material world. As M. J. Farah and N. Murphy explain, "It increasingly seems that all aspects of a person can be explained by the functioning of a materialist system . . . Brain imaging indicates that all of these traits [love, morality, and spirituality, among others] have physical correlates in brain function . . . the brain processes in question are not mere correlates but are the physical bases of these central aspects of our personhood. If these aspects of the person are all features of the machine [the brain], why have a ghost at all?" (1168). They go on to argue that body–soul dualism is a conceptual relic that impedes the understanding of the inseparability of mind/brain.

Despite its dominance and influence, I maintain that the reductionist approach to understanding neuroscience, human life, and thought, remains an inadequate accounting of reality. Neuroscientists stray outside the province of science when they argue or presume that God does not exist because we conjure limited mental images and ideas about God, or that those mental processes can be detected by neuroscience's techniques (Coghlan 9). Moreover, the so-called discovery of a God center or module or modules in the brain seemed to lead to the idea that, since perception of God occurred in the brain, the brain itself created not only the concept of God, but also God–Godself (Minton).

As inadequate as reductionism is any attempt to fuse or conflate neuroscience and theological-religious language. The rise of "non-materialist neuroscience" (an analogue to "intelligent design") as a means to interpret scientific data represents a threat that neuroscience must avoid, if it is to remain true to its principles. Likewise, the philosopher who desires to fuse the physical and spiritual and explore the tantalizing concept of the human brain as manifestation of God's image and likeness creates a "neurotheology" that is criticized by both science and theology (Küng 190). It is not within the province of theology to mold or invent science to substantiate claims that are the province of faith.

My efforts in writing this chapter will be in the mode of an exploration and conversation that, hopefully, communicates "across provinces of meaning, to show attentiveness to worlds, illustrate modes of experiences, and suggest universes not of discourse but of life" (Marty 127). I will discuss the concepts of complexity and emergent phenomenon in relation to the "presence of God" and mystical life in the course of this chapter. In particular, I will argue that the brain's neuronal networks and synapses, communicating through ascending complex hierarchical neuronal assemblies, have something to do with the language that the mystic has developed to communicate "inner experience." Neuroscience may help us better understand or explain what, in the language of the study of mysticism, has been referred to as states of consciousness, and may even lend further insight into visions, in a non-reductionistic way.

To make my case, I shall begin with a brief exploration of those two "provinces of meaning"; I shall then move to provide an overview of a history of the science as well as a review of neuroscientific studies of specifically heightened religious or mystical

states; finally, I shall turn to a summary of basic neurological principles with the aim of showing how these can help us understand and explain what might be occurring in the brain during mystical states or forms of consciousness, in a non-reductionist way.

Provinces of Meaning: The Perspectives of the Mystic and the Neuroscientist

The neuroscientist seeks to reduce the intractability of questions related to the brain. The mystic's grand experiment begins with preparation, such as "particular ascetical practices, sacramental rituals, and forms of prayer; but they were also based on the spiritual values, patterns of life, and paradigmatic figures revealed in the scripture and explained by the fathers" (McGinn 1991: 3). It is here, I suggest, in the discipline and experience of the mystic, where neuroscience might connect with the notion of states of consciousness sought by the practitioner of mystic theology. Here, I take a cue from Schopenhauer: "The mystic is opposed to the philosopher by the fact that he begins from within, whereas the philosopher begins from without. The mystic starts from his inner, positive, individual experience, in which he finds himself as the eternal and only being, and so on. But nothing of this is communicable except the assertions that we have to accept on his word; consequently he is unable to convince" (611).

The mystic and the neuroscientist, in their own respective ways, do indeed begin from within. The mystic perceives and experiences, then seeks a language that can approach only obliquely the subjective reality of consciousness. The neuroscientist enters the brain by microelectrodes, imaging techniques, insertion of genetic fragments, eavesdropping on the spikes and electrical oscillations (the brain's own secret code). Then, in general, the neuroscientist delivers a perturbation to the neural system – a stimulus of some kind to create a measurable response. From this comes a bit of information, which adds to other bits of information until the insight can be published and read by the wider community of scholars. Thus, when it comes to the brain and its mysteries, the philosopher (and often the psychologist) is at a disadvantage, attempting to determine what happens inside the "black box" from what comes out. The mystic perceives and experiences from within, but cannot convince. The neuroscientist presents and explains the brain's activity from within and speaks with the authority of a science that invites communal argument and confirmation. He or she attends to the task with scientific method and "its great secret weapon of experiment, and so it affords it ready access to the strength of conviction that successful empirical appeal can produce" (Polkinghorne 2009: 33). All this applies directly to development of a dialogue between neuroscience and theology. These two spheres of thought, each incomplete in their own explanatory powers, but enlightened by the existence of the other, exist in the same universe. Sharing with other religions and their practitioners certain similarities of language and experience, Christian mysticism nevertheless remains grounded in its own texts and traditions. Transcendence, experience of awe, and wonder are the province of all humanity because the human has a brain with an innate capacity for transcendent reflection.

The Scientific Background

Evolution as a basic interpretive lens for neuroscience

The theory of evolution in the world of science and neuroscience is well ensconced as the primary path from the eons after the "big bang," to the origin of life as one-celled organisms, and on to the human being and its brain. Through the process of evolution, the human brain made its entrance quite late in the evolutionary story. The human brain and mind evolved remarkable adaptive capabilities for the propagation of our species, surviving amidst a hostile world, and finding the most suitable and advantageous mate for procreation to the next generation. The repertoire of talents and behaviors paralleled the radical changes in the ability to acquire and store memory via temporal lobe mechanisms, and then to analyze and ponder them in our large frontal lobes. Despite huge differences in capability, our human brains continued through the evolutionary process sharing the same basic brain cells and signaling systems and nearly all of the same proteins with all other animals, from worms to apes.

In the early 1980s brilliant technical innovation accelerated the human genome project to the extent that in 2003 we were able to view the entire human genome. As "the cells in multi-cellular organisms have nominally identical DNA sequences (and therefore the same genetic instruction sets), yet maintain different terminal phenotypes," there is a "lack of identified genetic determinants that fully explain the heritability of complex traits" (Riddihough 611). From these observations, researchers have begun to look for other potential modifiers of phenotype (observable characteristics in distinction to genotype, genetic make-up) in the form of proteins, histones (proteins related to DNA), and other heritable factors that might account for the vast differences in the various end products (organisms born into the world). Thus the new science of "epigenetics" has recently developed to begin answering this conundrum. The impact and strangeness of this has not been fully realized. It is also the reason for the inability of the genome project to have "[pinpointed] causative genetic effects in some complex diseases" (611).

After millions of years of evolution, what aspects of human cognition (are there other candidates?) make us unique? Michael Gazzaniga, an evolutionary psychologist, has tallied up the scientific possibilities (Gazzaniga), but no overarching theme emerges, and the issue remains anything but straightforward (Adolphs 585). We are capable of introspection, and we create art and music. These are among the many qualities that are linked to our more powerful brains, but they don't fit readily into the evolutionary story.

The worlds of philosophy and theology may give us more direction than neuroscience in this regard. As A. J. Heschel puts it, "We must not be deceived by the limited splendor of theories that answer none of our most vital problems and only ridicule the inborn urge to ask the most crying, urgent question: What is the secret of existence?" (40) The human seeks meaningfulness. In the Bible, the lament of the preacher in Ecclesiastes echoes through to the present without a perceptible loss in intensity. Paul

Tillich addresses the sense of meaninglessness with the courage of faith: "Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience" (168).

Progress in neuroscience

A review of progress and experience in neuroscience reveals two distinct phases. The first phase begins in the third century BCE (Wills 1719–1720). Historians call these physician-philosophers "rationalists" who started to study and document the strangely beautiful anatomy of the brain. The language evolved slowly until the seventeenth century, when it achieved a comprehensive treatment in a famous atlas (Willis). The language of neuroscience was purely structural description. Philosophers, however, posited speculative theories in an attempt to link structure and function well before there were tools to refine and test the hypotheses. Thus most of these ideas are what some would describe as of historical interest only, but many remain entrenched in our language. For instance, that the heart was the source of emotion followed the observation that emotional stimulation was associated with increases in the pulse. Many interesting anecdotes could be used in illustration of this urge to link structure and function without proper causative foundation – an urge that continues into the present. Applications of the developing ideas of "scientific method" to neuroscience came with technical advances like the ability to harness, control, and measure electricity, and the development of the microscope. In 1906, with Ramon Cajal's discovery and description of the unique and characteristic cell of the brain, the neuron, and the recognition of its functional importance, known as the "neuron doctrine," neuroscience began its ascension into the truly scientific disciplines (Langmoen and Apuzzo 891–908).

Exponential progress best describes the second phase of neuroscience history. In the 1950s the addition of molecular biology and its tools to the language and practice of neuroscience made possible the discovery of the neuron's signaling molecules and the synapse (Kandel 1113–1120). Again because of technological advances and human ingenuity since around the 1980s, neuroscience has seen the addition of several other "languages," including neuroembryology, genetics, biochemistry, neuropharmacology, neuroinformatics, computational neuroscience and neuropathology. Convergence and "cross-pollination" of these many allied disciplines, including neuroinformatics, cognitive and neuropsychology, computer science, and statistics have enriched the depth of its questions and the descriptive capacity of its findings. Also importantly, neuroscience has applied a stunning array of new and complex technologies, using a reductive experimental approach. What appeared to some as a backward step in 1960 (what could we learn from insects and worms that had relevance to the human?) began to elucidate basic common properties in all life's nervous systems.

Neuroscientists linked the study of simple brain systems of comparatively few cells to human sensation and behavior. A case study by W. B. Scoville and B. Milner in 1957 described an individual who underwent removal of the inner aspects of the temporal lobes (bilateral medial temporal lobectomy) for intractable seizures (Scoville and Milner

11–21). After surgery he lost his ability to remember recent events or acquire new memories. While he could remember the distant past and could function relatively normally, he led a life otherwise permanently locked in the present. What was different about these neurons compared to other neurons within the human brain? Eric Kandel began the research that would eventually lead to a Nobel Prize in 2000, finding that neurons were essentially similar elsewhere in the brain. But it was the networks and their connections with other neurons that became the key to unraveling some of memory's secrets. He experimented with the giant sea snail Aplysia with its 20,000 neurons. Using newly devised microelectrode techniques, he became the first to map out a neuronal circuit that was associated with a specific behavior (Kandel 147–148). Much later, others used the C. Elegans worm, which has some 300 nerve cells (White 363) and found that mapping its entire neuronal circuitry took over 12 years. With the number of neurons in the human brain estimated at 100 billion, and with each neuron having possibly 10,000 connections to other neurons, it is clear that breakthrough technology is needed for progress on a human scale. Another experiment, on neuronal wiring from the mouse brain to two small muscles in the ear, revealed an even more problematic issue. Even in this small grouping of 15 neurons that reached 200 target muscle cells, no single wiring diagram looked the same for any animal (Hsu 6). If we needed additional evidence, this study confirmed uniqueness of each brain at the most basic level.

Brain development, learning, and experience

Thus, while the basic cell in all brains is the neuron, it is the connections between them that create uniqueness in each organism. Moreover, the neuron itself is exceedingly complex. In the human, we can recognize many different types of neurons, but even after one hundred years of research it remains unknown as to how many kinds there really are (Klausberger 53). Despite the diversity of neuronal types, all have the same basic characteristics. Electrical signals flow into the neuron via its dendrites. The output to other neurons occurs through its directionally specific axons that in turn synapse with other dendrites. By mechanisms that are unclear, neurons can change: (1) their excitability (will they respond?); (2) their response time to neuronal input; and (3) their firing frequency (Cipra 929). Many neurons encode time, which enables the brain to react to especially important sensory stimuli and to allocate memory location (Branco 1671–1672). The size and complexity of neuronal network connections can be greatly reduced if individual neurons can perform highly specific roles. Thus, although most neurons are connected locally, a few "hub" neurons possess long-range connections that link large numbers of cells (Bonifazi 1423). "Mirror" neurons, originally discovered in primates, are specific to comparing, learning, and replicating functions presented by other individuals and may facilitate neural representations of intention compared to reality (Miller 945). "Place" neurons fire as we move through the environment, keeping track of location (Hasselmo 46–47).

In all cases, neurons communicate one with another via specific molecules that generate signals within and between nerve cells. Some fifty different signaling molecules,

also known as neurotransmitters, act to stimulate or inhibit action at the neuronal level in the brain (there are many more chemicals that modulate along the axon). The molecules act primarily within the cleft between adjacent neurons, the synapse. The synapse has been studied for some fifty years as the connection between nerve cells, although much about synaptic diversity remains to be learned (Miller 164). The myriad ways in which the actions at the synapse are modulated remain poorly understood. The "graded" release of the transmitter molecule, its amplitude, its time within the synaptic cleft, the modulation of its uptake, and the number of neurons it might affect are under active study. A few of these transmitter molecules, and molecules with similar structures (such as those found in psilocybin mushrooms and Lysurgic acid diethylamide (LSD)), bind to serotonin's post-synaptic receptors and have psychoactive effects that clinically manifest as visual distortions, altered perception, including what might be called transcendent experience. These molecules have profound and potentially lasting effects on states of consciousness and are capable of activating complex neural circuits that are involved in altered states of consciousness. Observations of this sort are well documented. They serve as the basis for the vast psycho-pharmaceutical industry and form the basis for certain ancient religious rituals. Also, the idea points to the interesting concept of universal and inherent presence of such transmitter modulated circuitry in the human brain.

Neurons and their synaptic connections form specialized neural circuits, the substrates for each mental function of the brain. The organization of the neuronal wiring diagram or circuits within the human brain begins during development of the embryonic nervous system. Genetic code prescribes the initial "molecular signals [that] direct differentiation, migration, process outgrowth, and synapse formation in the absence of neural activity" (Kandel 1113). When the fetus moves her limb in the womb, that movement strengthens each synaptic connection, from the motor cortex, through each of the relays and modulating connections, all the way to and including the final nerve to muscle connections at the limb muscles. The long axonal fiber tracts connecting distant neuronal modules with each other are known collectively as the white matter. These bundles or tracts make up about half the total volume of the entire brain. The tracts expand and shrink (die off) and then expand again as the connections are used or not used in the course of mental processes or experience. Thus, "axons continue to grow, gain new branches and trim others in response to experience" (Fields 54).

Especially during periods of critical development, the brain exhibits an enormous "capacity for plasticity." Plasticity in the brain can be defined as neuronal adaptation "as the result of experience" (Kandel 1119). Thus, "even though the anatomical connections between neurons develop (initially) according to a definite plan, their strength and effectiveness are not predetermined and can be altered by experience" (1119). In childhood, the parietal and occipital connections (corpus callosum fibers) between the two hemispheres multiply and expand due to stimulation by learning and experience in language development and visual association. During adolescence, as the mind engages in social analysis, judgment, and abstract thought, the frontal lobe connections between the two hemispheres multiply and grow with experience. Development and maturation of white matter tracts are not complete in the frontal cortical areas until 25–30 years of age. Originally, it was thought that we were born with our full comple-

ment of neurons, but this view changed in the 1990s, when it was discovered that neurogenesis occurs throughout life. In the adult, it appears that new neurons are formed in the medial temporal lobes during the acquisition of new memories and learning (Clelland 210).

Learning involves the integration of groups of neurons that function together, become organized, and add additional relationships with other neuronal groups by a process of firing at the (approximately) same time, a phenomenon known as synchronous oscillation. This synchrony amongst progressively larger groups of neurons facilitates a more complex perceptual world. "Events that can be integrated over time by the target neurons are synchronous" (Buszaki 174). It is now thought that the synchrony of neuronal oscillations, their firing and relaxing, might act throughout the brain as a "mechanism for regulating the flow of information in the nervous system" (Schoffelen 111–113). These findings have meaning for all of the functions of the brain and for understanding how we exert control over the activity of our own brains. The cliché "mind expanding" thus finds its way into our language; oscillatory synchrony appears to be one of its principal mechanisms.

With the synchronization of progressively more complex representations of sensory and associated information, the brain "creates" our perceptions. "One of the most fundamental features of the primate brain is its organization into hierarchical networks for sequential information processing" (Connor 764). For visual information, the stages and elements in the process of deconstructing, filtering, and transforming the visual signal requires at least thirty different specialized modules consisting of progressively more complex representations. Recent evidence reveals two separate pathways in the visual system: one that processes an image's spatial location, and another that analyzes and "builds" what the image represents. Separate modules process facial recognition, facial expression analysis, and visual motion. These specialized neuronal modules represent elements of the most advanced processing levels of the "visual brain" (Kandel 1117).

In another example, the hierarchical network theory applied to memory involves distinction between types of memory, the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of memories, and finally the connection of memory with experience. Several aspects of memory encoding remain unclear. The cells in the temporal lobe that encode memory also have been found to participate in the formation of imagined future. "The same system we use to remember the past we also use to construct possible futures" (Miller 312). The hippocampus of the temporal lobe, which was originally thought to simply encode the memory, assists in integrating those memories into a coherent scene from an imagined future. "The hippocampus binds together elements of remembered scenes to create vivid and coherent memories" (312).

An event that evokes emotions and subjective feelings insures that the memory of that event will undergo processing that magnifies the actions of allocation and rapid retrieval. This "motivated memory" system, mediated by neuronal modules specific to analyses of threat, fear, and emotional valence and amplitude (the amygdale in the medial temporal region) and modulated by several well documented mechanisms, provides the scientific framework for what we all have recognized and experienced. "Memory retention is modulated by memory importance" (Todd). The presence of

emotion affords perceptual experience with greater salience and memory strength and complexity (Todd).

Neuroscientific Studies of Mystical and Meditative States

With that background, we turn now to the specific neuroscientific literature concerning Christian mysticism and some closely related topics. A literature search using a well known science online database lists 10,000 reports pertaining to religion and science or just religion. A similar search yielded 213,265 articles using the key words functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).[2] Neuroscience as a key word yielded 3,612 articles. Mysticism was the smallest collection with 353 reports. Yet if one combined the topics neuroscience and mysticism, there was but one article. Its title, "Why revelations have occurred on mountains? Linking mystical experiences and cognitive neuroscience," gives a hint as to what is to come (Arzy 841–845). Amongst the conclusions, the authors speculated that "the effects of acute and chronic hypoxia might preferentially affect two areas of the cerebral cortex . . . that have been linked to disturbed own body perceptions and mystical experiences" (841–845). High altitude physiology is a well established field with a body of important information critical to the prevention and treatment of altitude sickness. This study, however, does not contribute, in any sense of the word, to the interpretation of mystical experience or to the retrospective analysis of historical revelations on mountains. It represents instead a process that attempts to reduce mystical experience to a form of pathology. Further comment is unnecessary except to identify this as another example of parascience: it has been published as a "medical hypothesis" but is purely speculative and without foundation concerning the most basic variables and facts.

Further review of the literature revealed reports that employed fMRIs specifically to study mystical experience. These kinds of reports feature the dominant methodology in neuroscience's quest for understanding the neural correlates of various forms of consciousness and brain activity. A report seeking to elucidate the "indirect" neural correlates of mystical experience in fifteen Carmelite nuns' brains, aged 23–64, employed fMRI. The nuns' brains were scanned several seconds after they were requested to recall the most intense mystical experience of their lives. They also were evaluated with a "Mysticism scale" questionnaire and subjective interviews after the test experience (see Chapter 38, this volume). Several test subjects did report that they had experienced the presence of God. However, the "experiences lived during the Mystical condition [test conditions] were different than those used to self-induce a mystical state." The fMRI recorded activity in multiple specific regions on both sides of the brain during "mystical condition" experience separate from normal activity seen in the conscious person during other memory tasks and conditions. In other words, the authors believe they have further defined specific anatomical regions within the brain that are activated during the recall and experience of mystical states. The complexity of interpreting the regional activations and their various roles in the experience is daunting, but certain conclusions are drawn regarding, for instance, the "right middle temporal

lobe activation noted here during the 'Mystical condition' was related with the subjective impression of contacting a spiritual reality" (Beauregard 186–190).

Other forms of mystical deliberation or meditation have been studied. These experiments similarly sought the locations of modular neural activity in relation to meditative practice. These showed that "advanced" practitioners of meditation had much different patterns of activity than neophytes. One study analyzed the fMRI correlates during recitation of Buddhist scriptures and how different scriptures activated different regions of the brain (Shimomura 134–141). Another paper found that the neural correlates of "self-referential processing" (for example, awareness of one's attitudes, physical appearance, or beliefs, as related to others) were enhanced in Christian believers versus non-Christians (Han et al. 1–15). In yet another study, Tibetan participants demonstrated "no typical self-reference patterns" suggestive of "a minimal subjective sense of 'I-ness' in Tibetan Buddhists" (Wu et al. 324–331).

A paper on the neural correlates of religious and nonreligious belief demonstrated that all decision-making, not only religious belief, involved the activation of emotional networks as well as cognitive networks. The authors also showed, interestingly, that assent was much more rapidly achieved in the brain than dissent or uncertainty (Harris et al. 141–147). This paper documented a new insight: we apparently use emotional neural circuits as well as cognitive circuits not only in religious decision-making but in all decisions, even those in which numerical calculation is involved (at least in the context of a true and false test paradigm). Yet another study measured similarity between prayer and social cognition in highly religious participants, observing that praying shared the same neural networks as talking to one's friend (Schjoedt 199–207). A post-publication comment by the senior author – "we found no evidence of anything mystical" (Coghlan 9) – betrayed the pre-suppositions attendant to the agenda of the research paper, which includes an assumption that the author might have recognized mysticism if he had seen it.

The general public maintains a great interest in the workings of the brain and subjects related to mysticism and meditation. Caution, however, should be taken. New technologies available to anyone with an MRI machine have spawned a profusion of literature devoted to the "locations" or neural correlates of any number of conscious states, sensori-motor experiences, and emotions in the brain (Kaufman 1999). For instance, one paper announced the identification of the "God module" in the brain (Minton). Falling short of the criteria consistent with neuroscience, such articles rarely appear in scientific journals, but do occasionally attract media attention (Muller 1–2). Speculation in science is common enough, but these types of reports err in a categorical sense, drawing conclusions that are completely unprovable and should be considered nothing more than "para-science".

Intrinsic Brain Activity and Complexity Theory

In the review of literature devoted to the neuroscientific exploration of mystical and related states, it becomes apparent that the brain is adding certain modular activity to achieve altered conscious states. What is uncertain is the role of the brain's baseline

intrinsic activity in the development of both mystical states and the ability for induction of such states of consciousness. This intrinsic activity has recently attracted significant attention in the neuroscientific research.

"The most striking, yet perhaps the least appreciated, behavior of cortical networks is their regenerative, spontaneous [intrinsic] activity . . . Understanding the self-organizing ability of the brain is the most interesting challenge in science" (Buzsáki 370). The infant creates an astounding 1.5–2 million connections per second after her abrupt introduction into the world at birth. Novel environmental stimuli stream in through every sensory receptor on the skin, every sensation of smell, sight, sound, taste, and experience. The functional organization of distinct modular processing circuits in the infant brain consists of a remarkable array of specialized components, from the joint position and stretch of a muscle in one's finger, to the interpretation of the mother's facial expression as the infant gazes into her eyes. While the brain receives and responds to environmental stimuli, they alone do not drive it. Inherent, intrinsic patterns of brain activity account for most of the brain's energy consumption (Raichle 118–126). These intrinsic patterns, operating at sub-conscious levels, have become known as the "default states" of the brain's function. "Most of the brain's activity is generated from within, and perturbation of this default pattern by external inputs at any given time often causes only a minor departure from its robust, internally controlled program" (Buzsáki 10–11). This spontaneous activity of the brain does not simply process information but generates information, sculpting or refining it in an ongoing and continuous process of adjustment. That continual adjustment represents, in part, the consolidation of memory according to emotional valence, the connecting of learning with previous memory, and the organization of the information in time. As we grow older, oscillatory synchronization expands the associative repertoire of experience and "crystallizes" the memory. The ongoing activity of the brain's intrinsic activity speaks to the concepts of creativity and intuitive thought with experience.

The intrinsic activity of the brain consists of interconnected neuronal modules that behave as complex systems. The study of complex systems is called *complexity theory*.[3] While there is no universally agreed upon definition of complexity, it can be defined as "nonlinearity, and from non-linear equations, unexpected solutions emerge . . . [Non-linear systems] cannot easily be predicted or deduced from the behavior of individual lower level entities" (13). It might be appropriate to note that the individual lower level entities, neurons, are themselves exceedingly complex. The brain organizes itself initially in response to genetic codes and subsequently via experience and environmental influences throughout life. "At the same time, the emergent self organized dynamic" – i.e. the brain continually responds to incoming information – "imposes contextual constraints on its constituents, thereby restricting their degrees of freedom" (Buzsáki 13). Thus, there are certain stable and structured states or default modes within which the brain functions called "attractor" states. Because of the nature of complex systems, "very small perturbations can cause large effects or no effect at all" (11). The structures that modulate sensory information coming into the brain through the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and the body's senses of touch, pain, temperature, etc., continually operate in an oscillatory tension between excitation and inhibition,

which at once creates stability and at the same time prepares one for immediate and potentially drastic changes in consciousness (and behavior). Creatively devised experimental paradigms have described how perceptual visual learning can induce change within the basic intrinsic default modes of the human brain (Lewis 17558). Also, a recent study has shown that the functional maturation of the brain can be adduced by fMRI analysis of these same intrinsic patterns. Thus, the maturation, learning, discipline, and eventually the perceptual experience of the mystic (and all other humans engaged in the infinitude of experiences we encounter or seek), are found to emerge from this progressively and unimaginably complex matrix of sculpted integrated neural circuits.

The preceding attempt to summarize a substantial amount of recent neuroscientific information as it might pertain to Christian mysticism belies the fact that the overwhelming number of neuroscientific discoveries and accumulation of new facts has not been met with corresponding increases in insight as to how the brain integrates its information, or with overarching theses of how to connect the various organizational levels of brain function. This is most clear when one confronts the "hard problem" of consciousness. That the mind and brain are inseparable is accepted as a basic principle in neuroscientific thought. On the surface it seems commonsensical. But the concept remains paradoxically profound and in need of further explanation. "If the mind is the activity of the brain, this means only that the brain is capable of such lofty and astonishing things that their expression has been given names mind, and soul, and spirit" (Robinson 112). When one attempts to study the brain, one still must recognize that the modular brain circuits are not matched by a modular mind: the mind has a seamless subjectivity and is experienced only by the individual. The mind cannot be divided up "into modules or parts whose activity can then be studied with fMRI . . . because a unified mind has no components to speak of" (Logothetis 669). One can study the neural correlates of conscious states and can document to some degree the changing patterns brought about by learning, but all explanations of consciousness still fall short of understanding or even defining the concept. A working definition of consciousness for our purposes includes the personally qualitative and subjective experience of wakefulness (and also that portion of sleep when we are dreaming). The desire to explain mind and consciousness has perplexed philosophy and neuroscience together. While the mind and brain may be inseparable, they are not the same.

Consciousness has qualitative subjectivity; the brain does not. Consciousness emerges from the workings of the brain, but it cannot be traced back to brain anatomy or neuro-chemical processes. Neuroscience has no clear program as to how consciousness might be elucidated scientifically. Nevertheless, neuroscience remains interested in consciousness as a "hard problem," not as mystery. Mystical consciousness – with its sudden and unexpected visit, and its unique perceptual characteristics requiring a language of inner experience, appears to the neuroscientist as the result of an as yet ill-defined significant (electrochemical) perturbation to intrinsic conscious states. That it may arise as an altered form of consciousness by particular spiritual discipline and training is a new way of thinking and supported by fMRI data. The question then becomes – how and why?

Interpreting Mystical Experiences in Light of the Principles of Neuroscience

Preparation in mystical theology

The ability to visualize the process of continual physical alteration, sculpting, and evolution of the brain's intrinsic modes has promise in detecting and characterizing a variety of developmental disorders and neuropsychiatric conditions. Research will also further define the nature of how the brain responds to experience, training, education, and preparation. Thus it relates both to the sudden (possibly ecstatic) conscious states in mystical experience and perhaps, more importantly, to the preparatory aspects of mystical life (and all of life). "Mysticism involves not just intense forms of contact with God, of whatever duration, but also a transformed life. It is part of a process that begins, as we have seen, with acts of asceticism, reading the scripture, spiritual direction, and preparatory forms of prayer, but it is meant to spill out and over into a new mode of living" (McGinn 2006: 519). The continual consolidation, revision, "sculpting", of the "attractor" modes of the brain conferred by the preparation of the Christian ultimately confers the daily renewal of life and a "new mode of living".

The transformed life

In the Christian tradition, the transformed life begins with a "necessary starting point . . . [the] mysterious participation in [Jesus'] death and resurrection" (McGinn 1991: 63). Confession of faith and baptism initiate the believer into the community and fellowship of the church. Baptism has many forms within the Christianity (the time of life at which time baptism is performed, the modes associated with the sacrament, etc.), but its role is in the ritual cleansing of one's sin. Neuroscience has examined the act of washing, and the literature emphasizes the deep connection of the physical act of washing and its subconscious effects on neural processes. When one washes, concomitantly, one experiences "attenuation of the impact of disgust on moral judgment" as well as a weakening of the "urge to engage in compensatory behavior." In addition, "the psychological impact of physical cleansing extends beyond the moral domain . . . It can also cleanse us from traces of past decisions, reducing the need to justify them" (Lee 709). The act of washing and its relationship to baptism, the Christian's act of faith, reveals the intuitive understanding of the ancients – namely, that there exists a deeper physical connectivity between this sacramental tradition of Christianity and its effect on the consciousness of the participant.

The characteristics of "motivated" emotional memory as it becomes a part of the active structural activity within the brain draws us closer to the relationships that exist between the language of neuroscience and the language used by mystics and those who study and analyze the history of mystical experience. "When we talk about inner experience . . . we refer not only to how something is perceived by a subject, but we also seem to suggest that this perception takes place in the absence of external sensations

or testable stimuli . . . mystics' accounts of inner 'experience' of God (in itself an abstraction) become concrete and communicable by being fixed within modes of symbolic discourse that are presented as forms of affective intentionality . . . by utilizing language that tries to fuse feeling and knowing" (McGinn 2001: 156).

Conclusions

From all of this, three conclusions can be drawn. First, studying neuroscience creates the necessity to engage in a wide-ranging discussion in several languages that are specific to several intellectual disciplines. It is not surprising that "researchers at all levels occasionally feel a sense of unease in dealing comprehensively with this agenda" (Raichle 118). The stark reductionist techniques that have been used to advance neuroscience's program have unveiled aspects of the human brain/mind and our senses that have been presciently probed throughout history by writers, artists, theologians, philosophers, and human beings of all walks of life. Jonah Lehrer, in his book *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, engagingly explores this theme. A similar book-length treatment could have assigned "neuroscientist status" to Augustine and his hierarchical description of visual experience, to Jacques Maritain and his "concern for mystical knowing as the goal of all knowledge," and to many more extraordinary individuals in Christian mysticism's long history (McGinn 1991: 305).

Second, the languages used by science and theology create limitations concerning our conversation. "Neither science nor theology should make the mistake of supposing that it can answer the other's proper questions. Nevertheless, there has to be consonance between the answers that each gives, if it is indeed the case that there is a fundamental unity of knowledge about the one world of created reality" (Polkinghorne 2006: 57). I remain hopeful that the voices of authors like John Polkinghorne, who maintains clarity as to our place in the universe and our relationship to the "fundamental unity of knowledge," are heard and acknowledged in the coming conversation.

Third, the idea of a "fundamental unity of knowledge" seems antithetical to my earlier use of the metaphor of two provinces of meaning – scientific and theological. But from a purely scientific perspective, the fundamental unity of gravity and other basic forces appears, still, a distant likelihood, with each new permutation of string theory, emerging consequences of quantum mechanical theory, and astrophysical discovery.

"Theology [too] is a vocation in which the accumulations of the past and the experiences of the present are always freshly attuned to the phenomena of the emerging, changing, frenetically racing world" (Sittler 1). Boyd reported on "controlled out of body experience" experiments in England, and while not directly theological in scope, these raise "important questions about the body and the construction of the self that modern theology, as an interdisciplinary enterprise, must engage with critical and thoughtful response." He drew on the work of author Paul Eakin to say "that one should think of the self as 'less an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process'. . . One must take the body seriously, not as a separate container for the 'I', but indeed as something that can alter the very manner in which the 'I' understands itself." Protestant theologian Wolfhardt Pannenberg speaks of "language, which is the condition for the emergence

of a special inner world, which itself arises through man's physical involvement with his surroundings . . . there is no independent reality of the soul in contrast to the body, just as there is not a body that is merely mechanically or unconsciously moved. Both are abstractions. The only reality is the unity of the living creature called man, which moves itself and relates itself to the world" (Pannenberg 48).

The author and complexity theorist Stuart Kauffman's book *Re-Inventing the Sacred* goes further. Delving into complexity theory and the brain to document his ideas, he insists (surprisingly, for a scientist) that reductionism is inadequate. "Life, agency, value, and doing presumably have physical explanations in any specific organism, [but] the evolutionary emergence of these cannot be derived from or reduced to physics alone" (Kauffman x). He believes his "stance . . . called emergence" explains how life began, and why we need the sacred. He also asserts, however, that "all this came to exist without our need to call upon a Creator God" (x). His theory indulges in the use of quantum mechanics in explanation of his synthesis of a new sense of the sacred. (I have no quarrel with experts in quantum mechanics invoking the complex nuances of this very complicated discipline when discussing mind/brain, but it is presently purely theoretical speculation.) In so doing, in my opinion, he creates a new "god" that reigns over reality, veiled by impenetrably complex paradoxical and yet still "scientific" results, which emerge from complex theoretical constructs and equations. Presently, these brilliantly conceived but hardly provable theories of consciousness and mind – collectively termed "quantum mind theories" – require their own belief systems that will remain, however creative, bound by mathematical theory.

Finally, while we look to many theologians for help in responding to Kauffman's assertion that we need no God or that God is a creation of our minds, it appears increasingly (to me) that faith is a gift. Modern humans can maintain a belief in the Mystery, the Ineffable, the Indescribable God, and in Jesus, the "God–man." I sense that – however much I am a slave to evolutionary currents through work, music, singing, art, and language – all of the Christian's best efforts are vectors of praise and adoration to that Great Mystery. We place as much amplitude or power into these vectors as we can muster. Johann Sebastian Bach annotated each composition with the inscription SDG, "Soli Deo Gloria". Believers and non-believers alike have accorded Bach's music, which was always dedicated to the glory and service of God, status as one of the pinnacles of human artistic and intellectual achievement. We find direction in our lives in the love and praise of God. In Martin Buber's opinion, we "cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human: [we] can approach it through becoming human. To become human is what he, the individual man, has been creatd for" (Biemann 93). Karl Rahner explains that the "unity between love of God and love of neighbor is conceivable only on the assumption that the experience of God and the experience of the self are one" (McGinn 1991: 286). Perhaps this is the ultimate direction for the true Christian mystic. Marcelo Gleiser quotes Albert Einstein, "the fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science" (9–10). Perhaps, too, this is the emotion for the true Christian mystic. Finally, I join with St. Paul the apostle: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:33): humility for all.

Notes

1 I would like to gratefully acknowledge Christopher Family Foundation Research Fellow Andrew N. Mueller for his assistance in proofreading and editing this chapter.

2 While this chapter is not the place to review the story of fMRI, it is useful to briefly highlight its emergence and rise to prominence in neuroscience since the 1990s. MRI had been introduced into clinical practice in the late 1980s as a new and powerful way to image the brain through the use of an astonishing process that capitalized on the alignment of atoms within a body by a powerful magnetic field. One could then perturb that geometry with pulsed radio waves and differentiate the molecular and therefore cellular makeup of the tissues by the various recorded responses. MRI provides a detailed image of the brain with clarity and detail that has dramatically changed diagnosis clinical neurology and neurosurgery. It became apparent that with injection of various contrast agents and data acquisition and novel computer analysis, one could measure blood volume changes brought about by physiological changes within the brain. Because fMRI signal intensity is sensitive to the amount of oxygen carried by hemoglobin, this change in blood oxygen content at the site of increased brain activity can be detected with fMRI. This phenomenon is the basis for fMRI and is usually referred to as the blood oxygen level-dependent (BOLD) signal, following Ogawa and colleagues (Ogawa et al. 68–78). Neuroscience began a research program to map where a variety of moods, tasks, perceptions, responses to various stimuli happened within the human brain. For psychology, the technology has meant a new understanding of the brain's modular deployment of specific functions, and just as important, the integration of various brain regions as connective networks. The brain is never fully at rest, such that changes in the BOLD signal activation associated with a particular activity or state of consciousness need to be separated from the brain's baseline activity level. The resolution of fMRI as measured by the number of neurons in one voxel (a volume element of a few mm^3), contains on average 5.5 million neurons and 10^{10} synapses (Logothetis 875). Thus, the accuracy of where and what is happening at the cellular level is obscured by resolution of the measurement. Also, the time frame for fMRI activation is delayed for about six seconds.

3 Complexity theory has many divisions and can be applied to different disciplines. The mathematical constructs are termed "universal." Thus the same equations and principles can be applied to many disciplines, including such diverse things as fractal geometry in nature to scale free network theory in economics and computer theory, etc.

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Christian Mysticism in Interreligious Perspective

Leo D. Lefebure

In Search of a Definition

In comparisons of Christian mysticism to other religious traditions, the term "mysticism" has been used both positively and negatively in such varied ways as to risk being confusing, if not equivocal. Mysticism has been variously viewed as the best of religion and the worst of religion; as the heart of authentic religion and as religion's most dangerous distortion; as the esoteric center toward which all religions converge and as the element that decisively distinguishes or divides religious traditions. Perhaps most confusingly, mysticism has been viewed variously as a special, esoteric experience granted only to a few, sometimes involving preternatural phenomena, and also as the proper understanding of experience open to every religious practitioner.

Any univocal definition of mysticism will encounter serious difficulty in interreligious comparisons. For example, scholars have repeatedly compared the mysticism of Meister Eckhart to Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Otto; Suzuki 1988); but the noted Eckhart scholar C.F. Kelley denies that Eckhart is a mystic and firmly rejects the usual interreligious comparisons (50, 107–108). Many have identified mysticism in terms of the immediate experience of the presence of transcendent reality (Maréchal 103); Zen Buddhism, while repeatedly compared to Christian mysticism (Dumoulin; Lassalle 1986; Merton 1967), experiences no transcendent reality, eludes definition, and frustrates most attempts to categorize mysticism. Raimon Panikkar rightly warns that "the word *mysticism* is one of the words that has been interpreted in the most divergent ways – the understanding of it being dependent on the particular worldview of the user" (244). While it can be helpful to renounce the search for a univocal definition of mysticism and invoke Ludwig Wittgenstein's celebrated notion of "family resemblances" (1968: 31–32; 1965: 17; Brenner 23–24), multiple questions remain: who belongs in the family of mystics, what family traits distinguish them from others, and what type

of knowledge do mystics have? Wittgenstein also noted that while a knowledgeable person can be expected to articulate the elevation of Mount Blanc, an individual who knows the sound of a clarinet may well find it difficult to express that knowledge in words (1968: 36; Renard 11).

In lieu of a univocal essential definition, it may be helpful to look to usage, beginning with the historical origin of the term. According to the noted scholar of ancient Greek religion Walter Burkert, the terms "*mystical, mystery, mysterious*" come from the language of the ancient Greek mystery religions, especially the Eleusinian ritual practices; but he warns, "If *mysticism* means personal introspection, the opening of a deeper dimension in the soul until a light shines forth within, then the Eleusinian mysteries were precisely *un*-mystical. They were celebrated in front of thousands of participants in a sealed initiation hall" (248). Burkert traces the western concept of mysticism to Plato: "Our concept of *mysticism* first arose when Plato, appropriating the metaphors of the mysteries, used them in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* to express the spiritual contemplation of the philosopher, a concept which then was handed down through Neoplatonism and Monasticism" (248).

Hugh Bowden describes the center of the ancient mystery cults as direct experience of the deity: "It is this idea, that mystery cults offered those who took part in them the opportunity to experience direct, unmediated contact with the divine, that makes best sense of what we know about them" (21). The sacred mysteries revealed to the initiates were, however, to be kept secret from those outside. The Greek word, "*mueo*," which means "to initiate into the mysteries," is related to the word, "*muo*," which means "to be shut or closed, especially of the lips and eyes" (Liddell and Scott 454, 456). In ancient Greece the proper response to initiation into mystery was to shut one's lips and observe silence in an attitude of *phobos* (awe, reverence, fear), an injunction observed by the women at the tomb of Jesus in Mk 16:8 (Donohue and Harrington 459).

Regarding the relation of the ancient Greek mystery religions to early Christianity, there has been much debate. While some early twentieth-century scholars identified Christianity as a mystery religion, Helmut Koester warns cautiously,

> Both the rites and the religious concepts of the mysteries are so diverse that it is impossible to reconstruct a theological orientation that all of them shared . . . Insofar as they feature secret rites, to which not everyone was admitted, the term "mystery" religions is justified . . . Judaism and Christianity shared fully in this language, but again that says nothing about their specific character as mystery religions. (Koester 190, 191, 192)

Clayton N. Jefford also traces the notion of mysticism to the ancient Greek initiations and notes that one's definition of the term "mysticism" determines whether one finds it in early Christian literature:

> The actual noun "mysticism" (Gk. *mysteriodia*) occurs nowhere within these materials, but came into use only toward the end of the 5th century through the work of Pseudo-Dionysius (or Denys) the Areopagite . . . In its most general sense, ancient mysticism may be characterized both as the spiritual union of the human with the divine and as an introduction to some specific secret of mystery. It is in both of these senses that Hellenistic

mystery religions employed such concepts as "mystery," "mystical," and "the mysteries."
(932)

Bowden's and Jefford's characterizations of the ancient mysteries as initiations into direct contact with divinity leading to union with the divine offer a helpful starting point for comparative reflection on mysticism in theistic traditions. After research on a number of traditions, the Catholic philosopher Joseph Maréchal proposed a comparative definition of mystical states as "*the feeling of the immediate presence of a Transcendent Being*" (103). Following Maréchal's lead, Bernard McGinn defines the mystical element in Christianity as "that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God" (xvii). Similarly, Andrew Louth defines mysticism as "a search for and experience of immediacy with God" (xiv). Gershom G. Scholem, in presenting Jewish mysticism, uses Thomas Aquinas's definition of mysticism "as *cognitio dei experimentalis*, as the knowledge of God through experience" (4). Moshe Idel, reflecting on the Jewish mystical tradition, proposes, "If mysticism is the quintessence of religion, the quintessence of mysticism is the sense of union with God" (35). Likewise, Ahmet Karamustafa, following John Renard, views *m'arifa* in Islam as the experiential knowledge of God: "The mystic, in short, was the seeker of experiential knowledge of God" (xii; Renard 19).

In interreligious perspective, this approach is helpful in comparing Christianity to Jewish and Islamic mysticism (e.g., Idel and McGinn; Soltes), as well as to theistic traditions of Hindus and Sikhs (Carmen). This procedure, however, is problematic when applied to non-theistic or non-dualistic traditions such as the Advaita Vedantic, Taoist, and Buddhist traditions, which do not fit easily into a theistic mold. Often western scholars have framed their definition of mysticism in theistic terms and assumed this provides an adequate basis for interreligious comparison. While there is a conventionally accepted practice of identifying certain trajectories in the Abrahamic religions as "mystical" (Dinzelbacher; Idel and McGinn), in the Hindu and Buddhist contexts, the term may be more difficult to apply (on the problems with "Mystic Hinduism," see King 129–153; on Zen as not being a mysticism "in the Western sense," see Abe 1997: 145).

In light of these difficulties, some scholars have used more general language for mysticism. Annemarie Schimmel moves beyond theistic language and proposes a generic definition: "In its widest sense [mysticism] may be defined as the consciousness of the One Reality – be it called Wisdom, Light, Love, or Nothing" (4). However, the assumption that behind all mysticism there is One Reality that is called by various names has been questioned (e.g., Katz 1978); in particular, viewing Buddhism as consciousness of "the One Reality" that is called "Nothing" may be misleading (e.g., Abe 1995; 1997; 2003). Aware of the challenge of the non-dualistic traditions of South Asia, Raimon Panikkar shifts from talk of God or transcendence to language of "the Whole": "Consistent with the holistic vision of this entire study, I understand mysticism as the experiential awareness of the Whole and/or the study thereof" (244). Panikkar's use of the term is helpful in including non-dualistic traditions; but it is so broad that it is difficult to distinguish mysticism from religious awareness in general, or, for that

matter, from a secular humanism that reflects on the widest context of human exist-ence. Definitions that are narrowly focused risk excluding some traditions or forcing them into alien categories; definitions that are too broad can be so open-ended that they exclude nothing.

Albert Schweitzer formulated a general definition of mysticism and then explored its presence in the oldest extant Christian texts, the letters of Paul. Schweitzer proposes,

> We are always in the presence of mysticism when we find a human being looking upon the division between earthly and super-earthly, temporal and eternal, as transcended, and feeling himself, while still externally amid the earthly and temporal, to belong to the super-earthly and eternal. (1)

For Schweitzer, the center of Paul's mysticism is initiation into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The implication of this initiation is that

> whereas this dying and rising again has been openly manifested in Jesus, in the Elect it goes forward secretly but none the less really. Since in the nature of their corporeity they are now assimilated to Jesus Christ, they become, through His death and resurrection, beings in whom dying and rising again have already begun, although the outward seeming of their natural existence remains unchanged. (Schweitzer 110)

While Schweitzer's general definition faces difficulties like any other, his focus on Chris-tian mysticism as the entry into the death of Jesus so as to share his resurrection (Rom 6:3–4) provides a helpful way of describing the distinctively Christian experience of initiation into mystery. Without accepting any essential definition of mysticism as uni-versally adequate, scholars can nonetheless examine other traditions for analogies to the Christian initiation into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which has no exact parallel in other traditions.

Where some scholars view the term "mysticism" as applying to a rare, esoteric, or marginal experience, Schweitzer's usage implies a far broader application. In a similar vein, Vladimir Lossky speaks for the ancient and eastern traditions of Christianity in affirming that mystical theology arises from the experience of all Christians:

> In a certain sense all theology is mystical, inasmuch as it shows forth the divine mystery; the data of revelation . . . The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology, between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church . . . There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism. (7, 8, 9)

Similarly, Catholic ecclesiology, as expressed in Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Cor-poris*, and as studied by Emile Mersch and Avery Dulles, has viewed the entire church as the mystical body of Christ; in this usage the experience of oneness with God comes through participation in the mystical body of Christ; far from being the esoteric, privi-lege of a few, it is rather the experience of every Christian who is mystically united to Christ in and through the sacramental life of the church.

The Question of Method

Complicating the search for a definition of mysticism is the question of methodology. In the discipline of religious studies, scholars refrain from expressions of personal belief and religious commitment, seeking to understand mystical traditions in a relatively neutral manner apart from personal involvement on a religious path; all the methods of hermeneutics, historical and literary criticism, and the social sciences can contribute to this project, identifying points of historical and literary dependence as well as points of convergence and divergence (Capps). Some scholars insist that to do religious studies one must eschew any religious belief and examine claims of religious and mystical experience exclusively as social, biological, political, economic, historical phenomena (McCutcheon x). The perspectives of religious studies, drawing upon philosophy and the social sciences, can illumine many cross-cultural dynamics of mystical traditions, tracing historical influences and noting similarities and differences whether there was direct contact or not (for a recent proposal for "a new comparativism" in light of the linguistic turn, see Jensen). Claims of scientific neutrality, however, have often masked stances that were deeply hostile to religion (Milbank). When the discipline of religious studies "translates" mystical experience into non-religious categories without remainder and maintains that there is no transcendent source of religious and mystical experience, it ceases to be neutral and proposes a negative judgment on mystical claims of truth (J. Z. Smith 2004: 101–116).

In response, a number of scholars have questioned the claims of objectivity of religious studies (Zaehner: xiii; Fitzgerald; Milbank). The mystical traditions themselves pose the question whether one can understand them from the outside; often mystical authors insist that only those who have experienced the initiation can understand the language of the mystery. In the discipline of comparative theology, scholars begin from the practice of one religious tradition and open themselves to learn from and about other religious paths, acknowledging the possibility of personal transformation in the process (Clooney 2010). This approach need not replace religious studies but can complement and correct its approach. In comparative theology, scholars rooted in one tradition seek to understand the commitments and practices of another mystical tradition and to relate them to their own tradition. This approach is self-involving and grounded in a particular religious community. One learns not by bracketing ontological presuppositions but by bringing one's own religious assumptions into the discussion and observing the interaction between the other religious tradition and one's home tradition. There is an element of unpredictability and risk involved, for scholars can never predict or control how the investigation will affect their own religious self-understanding. In this method, there is always the possibility of being personally transformed by an inter-religious encounter. There is no pretense of establishing a completely objective stance. Unlike those who insist that scholars must surrender the traditional claims of any particular religion in order to learn from another tradition, comparative theologians bring the claims of their own tradition into the project of reading another tradition.

From the encounter with other mystical traditions there can emerge another level of interfaith learning that is not usually included in academic curricula but that can

be a profound form of learning. This involves entering not only into the ideas of another religion but into the religious and spiritual practices as well. Mysticism involves an initiation into a mystery that those outside may never fully grasp. One Christian response to this challenge has been to enter into the practice of Hindu or Buddhist meditation (Abhishiktananda 1979; 1998; Lassalle 1974; Johnston; Kennedy). Interreligious explorers such as Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Sara Grant, and Hugo Enomiya Lassalle accepted initiation into other traditions without renouncing their own Christian practice. Bede Griffiths went to India, adopted the lifestyle of a *sannyasi*, combining this with Catholic monastic practice, leading to a personal synthesis of Christian and Hindu perspectives (Griffiths 1990). Sara Grant also journeyed to India, where she was initiated into the intuition of Advaita and reflected on her Catholic faith and practice in light of non-duality (Grant). Lassalle practiced Zen in Japan and was recognized by his teachers as having achieved *satori* and was authorized to teach Zen to others, all while remaining a Catholic priest (Lassalle 1974). Not all have been persuaded by these experiments. Skeptics, such as Phra Khantipalo, have questioned whether the method of dual practice of traditions is possible or coherent. Phra Khantipalo, an English Theravadin monk, warned that

> components of one religion cannot be borrowed and grafted onto another. . . . Cutting off all views means ceasing to believe anything – it would mean for a Roman Catholic ceasing to believe in God, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the Saints, and so on, all the dogmas on which that religion is founded. Sincere Christians, if they want to borrow from Buddhism, are in a quandary since they wish to meditate but still to hang on to their views. This can be done only part of the way. (Hackett 105)

Nonetheless, many Buddhists and Hindus have respected these experiments, which represent some of the most creative interreligious explorations of mysticism in recent history (Cornille).

A Fundamental Distinction: Mystical and Prophetic Religions

One of the most influential approaches to mysticism in comparative studies has been to distinguish sharply between "mystical" and "prophetic" religions. In his influential study of prayer, Friedrich Heiler, a convert from Catholicism to Lutheranism who advocated "Evangelical Catholicity," defined mysticism as "that form of intercourse with God in which the world and self are absolutely denied, in which human personality is dissolved, disappears and is absorbed in the infinite unity of the Godhead" (136). Heiler sharply distinguished mysticism from "prophetic religion" or "religion of revelation" which he viewed as "the lofty religion" represented by the Bible, "something quite different and independent" from mysticism (136). Heiler applied his definition of "pure mysticism" to the Upanishads, Vedanta Hinduism, Plotinus, and Theravada Buddhism; he also identified a more "personal mysticism" in Taoism, Hindu Bhakti, Sufism, and Christianity, though he still strictly distinguished this from prophetic religion (136). However, the application of Heiler's definition of pure mysticism to Theravada Buddhism

is profoundly problematic because it imposes alien categories that distort Buddhism's self-understanding. Theravada Buddhism does not see the Eightfold Noble Path as intercourse with God and does not see Nirvana as absorption into the Godhead.

In a similar vein, Abraham Joshua Heschel made a sharp contrast between other-worldly mysticism and biblical prophetic religion:

> Mysticism, born in a longing for a world beyond this world, strives for a perception of time-less reality. It flourishes in a soul for which the world with its petty troubles and cares does not deserve mention . . . As the God of Israel is concerned with the here and now, the attention of the prophet is directed upon the social and political issues of the day. The mystic is absorbed in contemplation of the infinite; the prophet's eye scans the definite and finite, the insolence and hypocrisy of man, the little cruelties, the silly idolatries. (143–144)

The contrast between the mystical and the prophetic has frequently been used to distinguish the Abrahamic traditions, which are viewed as "prophetic," from the Hindu, Taoist, and Buddhist traditions, viewed as "mystical" (e.g., Dhavamony 237; Ching 228). However, other scholars have sharply questioned and rejected this use of "the mystical" as a general category of contrast (e.g., King; W. C. Smith 1981: 174). Even on biblical grounds the sharp contrast between mystical and prophetic has been challenged. David Stanley begins his study of mysticism in the New Testament with an exploration of the mystical elements in the prophets of Israel: "Each of Israel's prophets, beginning with Samuel, was made cognizant of his specific mission to God's people by experiences that successive sacred writers described in terms of the 'mystical'" (9). Similarly, Ori Soltes maintains: "The prophetic experience offers itself as a natural starting point for Jewish and Christian mystical thinking in that the prophet experiences a form of the intimacy with God that the mystic hopes to achieve" (23). As we have seen, Schweitzer challenged much of the Protestant tradition by locating mysticism in the oldest extant Christian texts, the letters of Paul (on Schweitzer's critical relation to other Protestant theologians, see Pelikan). The broad level of generalization of "mystical" and "prophetic" as distinct types forces religions somewhat artificially into one of two general categories and neglects complex, multiple relationships.

With more nuance, Paul Knitter takes up the distinction between prophetic and mystical in his identification of three approaches to religious pluralism, distinguishing: (1) the "philosophical-historical bridge" represented by John Hick; (2) the "religious-mystical bridge" represented by Raimon Panikkar; and (3) the "ethical-practical bridge" which is linked to social prophecy (112–113, 125–148). For mystics, according to Knitter, "the same Divine Mystery or Reality is being experienced within the many different religions. There is a core mystical experience pulsating within the religious traditions that have endured through the ages" (125).

Mysticism as the Transcendent Unity of Religions

As Knitter notes, another widespread approach to mysticism in comparative studies argues there is a mystical core of religion, sometimes thought to be discernible only on

an esoteric level. Far from distinguishing religions according to whether or not they are mystical, this approach sees mysticism as the profound, uniting factor in all traditions, even though not all practitioners may be aware of it. Given that mystical initiations in various traditions often involve articulations of oneness, many scholars esteem mysticism highly as the point of unity across all traditions, seeing it as *the* resolution to the problem of religious differences. Aldous Huxley famously argued there is a common message and set of assumptions lying beneath all the different traditions, a *philosophia perennis* that takes different forms without essential distinction. Huxley arranged quotations from a wide range of "mystical" writers under his own headings, commenting on them in light of his conviction that they are at root in agreement.

Without necessarily accepting all of Huxley's assumptions, others have articulated a mystical sense of oneness beyond all boundaries. Jewish theologian Arthur Green identifies an intuition of oneness that is allegedly common "to all mystics": "If all is One, then each of us is not *really* a separate being. 'Self' becomes something of an illusion . . . The great mystics in all traditions, including the masters of Jewish secret lore, have always known this to be the case" (7). About a month before his death, Thomas Merton evoked a primordial unity beyond the usual interreligious borders:

> And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are. (1973: 308; see also Pramuk 165)

Bede Griffiths viewed mystical experience as the origin and goal of all religion: "All religion derives from a mystical experience, transcending thought, and seeks to express this experience, to give it form, in language, ritual, and social organization" (1976: 76). Rudolf Otto believed that there is "a uniform nature of mysticism" across religions and cultures and centuries; to illustrate this, he compared Shankara and Meister Eckhart by juxtaposing quotations from each thinker, claiming, "With a little skill it would be possible to weigh up and present their fundamental teachings that the words of the one would read like a translation into Latin or German from the Sanskrit of the other, and vice versa" (5, 14). While Otto recognized various forms of mysticism, he summarized the fundamental wisdom of the mystic: "Even that which was the Eternal-One and is in all things, that is the ground of my soul – that is my soul. This I know. He who does not know this has not yet seen, or has only partially seen" (277). The claim of mystical insight can serve as a form of special knowledge not easily accessible to all; critics can then be rebuffed as those who have not yet seen the truth.

Writers on mysticism often interpret and judge other traditions in light of their own assumptions; Christians have no monopoly on this procedure. Hindu scholar Ravi Ravindra confidently presents his interpretation, *The Gospel of John in the Light of Indian Mysticism*, assured that he can identify the various levels of attainment of the Johannine characters on the grid of traditional Hindu terms such as *manas* (the Jewish priests) or *buddhi* (John the Baptist), while seeing the Gospel of John itself as "the Christian Veda *par excellence*" (22, 47, 11). To those who would question his mystical

interpretation, Ravindra proposes a distinction between horizontal and vertical dimensions: "I am persuaded that the major division in the human psyche is not horizontal or regional, dividing the eastern from the western soul, but rather vertical and global, separating the few from the many, and the spiritual, inner, and symbolical way of understanding from the material, outer, and literal one – culturally as well as in each human soul" (1–2). Ravindra substitutes a mystical Hindu context for the context of Hellenistic Judaism without attention to their significant differences, resulting in an interpretation that invokes Hindu categories without enough clarification or nuance to be completely convincing.

Muslim scholars from the Perennialist or Traditionalist School inspired by René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, also propose an esoteric interpretation of mysticism as the key to seeing the underlying, transcendent unity of all the world's religious traditions. Guenon argued that a primordial, perennial tradition provided the ground for all traditional religions, but he believed this had been almost totally destroyed by modern western culture. Schuon developed Guenon's proposal, arguing that all the conflicting exoteric elements of religious traditions converge toward an esoteric core, which is the "transcendent unity" of religions beyond all oppositions. To realize this unity, one must move beyond the literal, dogmatic interpretation of exoteric doctrines and grasp the inner core. Continuing this trajectory of interpretation, Nasr explains,

> Esoterism is that inward dimension of tradition which addresses the inner man, *ho eso anthropos* of Saint Paul . . . The esoteric is the radius which provides the means of going from the circumference to the Center, but it is not available to all because not everyone is willing or qualified to undertake the journey to the Center in this life. (77; see also Schuon)

Esoterism can claim roots in a number of earlier paths, but its meaning shifts in different contexts. Like the secretive ancient Greek mystery cults, some mystical traditions, such as kabbalah or Tibetan Buddhism, have traditionally forbidden the revelation of esoteric lessons to those not properly initiated. In this sense, "esoteric" refers to mysteries that are not to be divulged to non-initiates. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus pointedly remarks to his inner circle of disciples that those outside are not intended to understand his parables: "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside, everything happens in parables, in order that, seeing, they may see and not perceive, and hearing, they may hear and not comprehend, lest they turn and it be forgiven them" (Mark 4:11–12; Collins 247). Adela Collins comments that for Mark, the mystery that is so difficult to understand is "the divinely willed way in which the rule of God will manifest itself and come to fulfillment through the agency of Jesus," especially the suffering and death of Jesus as God's anointed one (249). Elliot R. Wolfson, building on the work of Gershom Scholem, notes the paradox of studying the esoteric tradition of kabbalah; if the scholar divulges the esoteric secret, it is no longer the esoteric secret: "to be a secret, the secret cannot be disclosed as the secret it purports to be, but if the secret is not disclosed as the secret it secretly cannot be, it cannot be the secret it exposes itself not to be" (2). Wolfson, like Scholem before him, nonetheless proceeds to present a public analysis of esoteric wisdom.

Even apart from deliberate commands of secrecy, the mystical writers of many different traditions frequently describe the wisdom they have learned as ineffable and incomprehensible; but they nonetheless proceed to name the unnameable, often using symbolic or allegorical language (Sells). Zen Buddhist scholar Masao Abe insisted that the "paradoxical truth" of the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-origination "can be realized not through speculation but only through existential practice. Hence the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path and sitting meditation, *zazen*, have been emphasized" (1995: 78). According to Abe, only those who have realized the Dharma can speak of it (2003: 41); but he spent decades discussing the Dharma with Jews and Christians who had not undergone the initiation of Zen and who made no claim to *satori*. Other Zen masters have playfully questioned the centrality and importance of such claims to the privileged insight of *satori*. Huston Smith once asked the great interpreter of Zen, Shunryu Suzuki, why, in all his writings on Zen, he never mentioned *satori*. Suzuki's wife interjected, "It's because he's never had it!" Suzuki then "batted his fan at her in mock consternation and with a finger to his lips hissed, 'Shhhh! Don't tell him!' When our laughter had subsided, he said simply, 'It's not that *satori* is unimportant, but it's not the part of Zen that needs to be stressed' " (Smith 2006: ix).

The representatives of the Perennialist School use the term "esoteric" in a technical sense to refer to the wisdom of ultimate unity that is not easily accessible and that is concealed from most persons dominated by modern western culture. Schuon explains that "in the present state of humanity such evidence [for the transcendent unity of religions] is only accessible to a spiritual elite that becomes ever more restricted in number" (xxxiii). To illustrate the wisdom that lies beyond all oppositions, Schuon cites a Sufi saying to illumine the stages of insight: "The exoteric way: I and Thou. The esoteric way: I am Thou and Thou art I. Esoteric knowledge: Neither I nor Thou, Him" (47). Esoteric claims pose many questions. Claims of esoteric understanding can serve as a preemptive response to potential critics who remain outside. The difficulty or impossibility of sharing the wisdom gained in a mystical initiation with those outside poses a challenge to interreligious reflection and to scholarly investigation: Can an outsider truly understand a mystical path that one has not trod? Does the practice of one religious tradition help or hinder the understanding of another path?

While the esoteric approach of the Perennialist School has been enthusiastically endorsed and popularized by Huston Smith (1984), numerous other scholars have sharply rejected the esoteric/exoteric distinction and the claim of transcendent unity (e.g. Abe 1995: 43–50; Katz 1983; King). Mark J. Sedgwick has critically studied the ambiguous development of the Perennialist tradition, including its questionable political affiliation with European Fascism in the twentieth century. In an influential article, Steven Katz questioned claims of an esoteric core and stressed that mystical experience comes to us only through specific expressions in language and culture (1978). Katz insists on the irreducible differences between mystical traditions, leaving little room for overlapping traditions or for those explorers who have undergone initiation in more than one tradition.

In recent years scholars have become wary of the method of taking themes out of context and identifying them. Moshe Idel warns that

both the comparison and the ensuing historical conclusions related to the influence of one phenomenon on another must be preceded by an effort to achieve a phenomenological understanding of the compared material. Without some extended analysis that strives to clarify the extent of the commensurability between two systems under scrutiny, it is difficult to discern the significance of a certain appropriation even if it actually took place. . . . To put it in other words: to be meaningful, a comparison must be undertaken between structures rather than between concepts. (2005: 49)

Idel warns that any exact academic reconstruction of mystical experience is impossible and concludes:

It follows that the psychological processes described by mystical literature as unitive experiences are beyond the scope of academic research. If so, the scholar making a serious comparison among mystics, even when they belong to the same religious group, must limit himself to an analysis of their motifs, ideas, and sources, abjuring inferences as to the similarities or differences between the actual experiences. (1988: 36)

Mysticism in the Abrahamic Traditions

Given the limitations of space, only the briefest sketch of interreligious explorations among particular traditions can be given. The Abrahamic traditions contain multiple intertwining historical and theological relationships. The figures of the Hebrew Bible such as Moses and Elijah appear in both Christian and Islamic mysticism; Jesus and Mary appear in Sufi Islam. These mystical traditions often flow into each other, having multiple historical points of intersection and influence. Christian mysticism emerged from a Jewish matrix that was heavily influenced by Hellenistic religion and culture. Recent scholarship has questioned the notion that there was a full, final separation between the Jewish and Christian traditions in the first centuries CE (Boyarin; Becker and Reed). In influential lectures in 1963 and 1964, Krister Stendahl argued that the Apostle Paul did not convert from one religion to another but rather accepted his mission to preach to the Gentiles while remaining a Jew. In light of Stendahl's persuasive thesis, the mysticism of the Apostle Paul appears not as an alternative to or replacement for Judaism; it comes from a Jew who has accepted Jesus as the Christ. Increasingly, scholars study the New Testament as Jewish texts. Rather than dividing neatly in the first century, Jewish and Christian communities intertwined for centuries, as many Jews accepted Jesus. Sharp delineations of Jewish and Christian mysticism face the challenge of accounting for the overlapping of the Jewish and Christian communities in antiquity.

In relation to Islam, there were also traditionally questions of where boundaries should be drawn. Historically, Christians generally did not see Islam as a distinct religion at all, but rather followed the lead of John of Damascus in interpreting Islam as a Christian Christological heresy (Daniel). Some historians have explored the question of direct contacts and influences among these traditions, as in speculation about possible influence of Syrian Christian monks upon Sufi Muslims (Schimmel 10) or of Sufis upon Christian mystics (Asin Palacios 1981; 1992).

Regardless of the question of direct historical influence, often partners in dialogue find multiple points of contact across traditional boundaries. One frequent point of comparative discussion has been union with God. In a conversation between Sufi Muslims and eastern Christians, Bishop Kallistos Ware reflected on the history of the term, *le point vierge*, which Thomas Merton adopted from the tenth-century Sufi saint and martyr, al-Hallaj, who said, "Our hearts are a virgin that God's truth alone opens" (Cutsinger: 3). Ware claimed that al-Hallaj's notion of the heart "is exactly what is signified by the 'deep heart' in the neptic theology of the Orthodox Church" (3). For Ware, "neptic theology" (from *nepsis*, sobriety, vigilance) "includes the realms of both 'ascetical theology' and 'mystical theology', as these are understood in the Roman Catholic tradition" (3–4, n. 6). Ware argues that there is a profound agreement among St. Mark the Monk, al-Hallaj, and Merton concerning this deep, inner heart that "belongs only to God. It is pre-eminently the place of Divine immanence, the locus of God's indwelling" (4).

Another important theme for comparative reflection is spiritual death, a theme that appears in different ways in various traditions. As we have seen, Christian mysticism involves initiation into the death of Jesus Christ so as to share in his resurrection. Moshe Idel comments on kabbalah, "*Devekut* is here closely related to the state of poverty or 'death'; indeed, cleaving leads to the emergence of the next mystical stage of total disengagement from the world" (1988: 69). Schimmel comments that in Sufism, "The goal of the mystic attained, sometimes, through constant meditation is *fana*, annihilation, and subsequent perseverance in God. This final experience is always regarded as a free act of divine grace, which might enrapture man and take him out of himself, often in an experience described as ecstatic" (178). Neither of these descriptions can be identified with the Christian initiation into the death of Jesus Christ, but they offer analogies to be explored.

Hindu and Buddhist Traditions

Christian mysticism shares many points of contact with various aspects of the Hindu traditions, but nothing in Hinduism or Buddhism offers a precise analogue to the place of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Christianity. Often comparisons have explored the experience of oneness. Henri Le Saux meditated with Sri Ramana Maharshi, experienced an Advaitic awareness of non-duality, adopted the lifestyle of a Hindu *sannyasi*, and became known in India as Abhishiktananda (Monchanin and Le Saux). He experienced painful conflicts between the new experience and the ontological assumptions of his tradition of origin. For years he lived with both the Hindu experience of non-duality and also the Roman Catholic experience of the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. Both were powerful realities in his life, but for years he could see no resolution of the contrast between them. In his last years this tension was resolved, though he could not capture the resolution in conceptual terms (Abhishiktananda 1998; Stuart).

The Buddhist tradition also contains many points of contact with Christian mysticism, but there is a profound difference between Christian mystical paths that assume a doctrine of creation out of nothing and Buddhist paths based on *pratitya-samutpada*,

dependent co-arising; even when verbal formulations are very similar, there remain significant differences in the underlying assumptions.

Nonetheless, there have been creative experiments in thinking across boundaries. John Keenan proposed a thoughtful interpretation of Jesus Christ and Christian mysticism based upon the hermeneutics of the Yogacara ("Consciousness-only") school of Mahayana Buddhism. Keenan proposes that the Yogacara analysis of consciousness offers better language to express the mystical insights of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite than neo-Platonism; he also argues that the intent of the Council of Chalcedon can be more felicitously expressed in Yogacara understanding that was developed "both to affirm the primacy of mystic meaning and to maintain a limited, but valid role for theoretical discourse" (2).

Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt offer a very different model that seeks understanding of similarities and differences without proposing any synthetic hermeneutic. They present a close reading of Jan van Ruusbroec, comparing his perspectives to the practice of Buddhist meditation in the cautious hope that each can shed light on the other.

Often in comparative theology, interreligious conversations lead interlocutors to explore their own mystical tradition with new awareness. Even when the differences among traditions are profound, there are frequently resonances of themes and of styles of proceeding. As in the case of Wittgenstein's example of the difficulty of expressing in words one's knowledge of the sound of a clarinet, it may be hard or impossible to verbalize the outcomes of the dialogues. Countless more comparisons are possible, as the elusive mystical traditions of the world's religions provide multiple opportunities and invitations for exploration.

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