

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 dialogue⁸ 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 worshipping 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 Christians 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 detachment⁵¹); 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 Judaeo-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).

References

- Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Dionysius. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987.
- Hadewijch of Antwerp. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB, Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980.
- Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978.
- McGinn, Bernard. *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1: *The Foundations of Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad, 1991.
- McGinn, Bernard. *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 3: *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200–1350*. New York: Crossroad, 1998.
- McNamer, Sarah. *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Perrin, David B. "Mysticism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 442–458.
- Porete, Marguerite. *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky, Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993.
- Rahner, Karl. "Everyday Mysticism," in *Karl Rahner, the Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt. New York: Crossroad, 1986, 69–70.
- Schleiermacher, Friederich. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 15–33.
- Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. "Cosmic Life," in *Writings in Time of War*, trans. René Hague. New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968, 13–71.

