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CHAPTER I

Feminists, philosophers and mystics

> The important questions to be asked by theology ... are: who should do theology, and where, and in whose interest, and for whom? (Metz 1980: 58)

What is mysticism? Is it an experience of direct communion with God? Or is it a human phenomenon, at its best benign piety and at its worst muddle-headed fanaticism claiming divine authority for intolerant behaviour? Is mysticism something shared by all world religions, which could serve as a link between different ways of life and belief? Or is the idea of a mystical core of religion misguided – perhaps yet another of the totalising discourses of modernity? What does mysticism have to do with justice? Is mystical experience private and subjective, or does it have political and social implications? Is mysticism related to gender, perhaps especially available to women? Or is feminist mysticism impossible; is mysticism essentially patriarchal?

Implicit in all of these questions is an agenda of power. The fascination of the subject of mysticism is not, I suggest, simply a fascination with intense psychological experiences for their own sake, but rather because the answers to each of these questions are also ways of defining or delimiting authority. The connection of questions of power to questions of mysticism is obvious as soon as one stops to think of it: a person who was acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will. It is obvious, too, that if defining mysticism is a way of defining power, whether institutional or individual, then the question of who counts as a mystic is

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of immediate importance. From the early days of the Christian church, struggles for authority were prominent; and throughout the medieval period, the struggles increased. It was crucial to the ecclesiastical establishment that those who claimed knowledge of the mysteries of God should be contained within the structures of the church, since the power of the church would be severely threatened if it should be acknowledged that access to divine authority was possible outside its confines.

In modern times, the issues of power in relation to mysticism have shifted less than we might think. If, for instance, mystical experience (or religious experience more generally) were to be trusted, this would provide an authoritative basis for knowledge of the existence and nature of God: if this were to be established and acknowledged, it would accord enormous authority to those whose experience was deemed to be veridical. Or, from another perspective, if mystical experience could be delimited as private and subjective, this would be a way of ensuring that it did not have to be taken into account by those making social and political decisions: religion could be kept out of politics. If mystical experience were seen as gender-related, especially available to women, and at the same time also as private and subjective, then this could be used to reinforce stereotypes of women as the spiritual nurturers of humanity while keeping both women and spirituality firmly domesticated.

It is a commonplace of postmodern philosophy that knowledge and power are interconnected, and that an investigation of what is allowed to count as knowledge can never be far removed from an investigation of power relations. It is a commonplace of feminist thinking that any investigation of power relations soon reveals issues of gender. Putting these two commonplaces together, it becomes reasonable to suppose that answers to questions of what mysticism is and of who counts as a mystic, though they will not be constant, will always reveal interconnected struggles of power and gender. They will, in other words, turn out not to have the neutrality and objectivity about them which modern philosophical discussion of them regularly assumes.

In this book I wish to explore the connection of power and gender in the definition of mysticism by investigating a series of

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situations in which the struggle over who should count as a mystic is apparent. Apart from its intrinsic interest, this exploration has two aspects. First, it is intended to undermine certain modern philosophical assumptions about mysticism, which I will outline in a moment. Secondly, it is meant as a contribution to the feminist project of deconstructing patriarchal paradigms of power while celebrating the lives of women of spirit who carried forward alternative visions, often at great cost to themselves.

Both of these aspects are necessary, as I will show in more detail below. Contemporary philosophers are seduced by a particular picture of mysticism, inherited largely from William James, which involves them in a stately dance of claims and counterclaims about experience and interpretation, language and ineffability, credulity and doubt. The movements of this dance are by now well defined; but what is hardly ever noticed is how little resemblance they bear to the things which preoccupied the medieval men and women whom they themselves would consider to be paradigm mystics. Nor is it at all usual for modern philosophers discussing mysticism to pay close attention to the issues of power, let alone gender, which I suggest are essential to adequate analysis.

Whereas philosophers of religion have paid a great deal of attention to mysticism (albeit in my view to a conception of it which owes more to modern philosophical ideas than to classical mystics of the Christian tradition) feminists have hardly paid attention to it at all. There have been important studies of gender-related issues such as food and fasting among medieval women mystics (Bynum 1987a), and also of individual women mystics (Jantzen 1987; Newman 1987), which I shall draw upon in the chapters which follow. There has also been considerable interest in specifically women's spirituality, whether as part of the Christian tradition or as pagan or goddess spirituality (Conn 1986; Fischer 1988; Plaskow and Christ 1989; Spretnak 1982). But there has been virtually no attention paid to the way in which the delimiting of mysticism through the centuries was crucial to maintaining male hierarchical control in church and society, let alone to the ways in which issues of power and gender are intertwined in contemporary philosophical discussions of mysti-

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cism. Clearly, feminists have much to gain from pondering the ingredients which have gone into the construction of mysticism, both historically and in the current philosophical agenda.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall first discuss in more detail some current philosophical perspectives on mysticism, clarifying and substantiating the claims I have just made regarding the misguidedness of much philosophical preoccupation with mysticism. I shall then turn to a brief consideration of postmodern philosophy, particularly that of Foucault, who offers useful tools for examining issues of power and gender, and a model for the deconstruction of the notion of mysticism. However, I shall also point out some of the limitations of Foucault from a feminist perspective, and conclude the chapter with a discussion of the feminist philosophical methodology that will be used in the remaining chapters.

I THE PHILOSOPHICAL PICTURE

Contemporary philosophers of religion have a clear idea that mystical experiences are private, subjective, intense psychological states. Whatever else is open to question about mysticism, this, at least, is assumed. This is true in spite of the fact that it is a commonplace among contemporary writers on mysticism that the word is notoriously difficult to define.

For example, Nelson Pike in his *Mystic Union* (1992) concentrates wholly on the variety of intense psychological states which he believes certain mystics have described as union with God. Pike takes seriously the need to look at primary sources, and spends time trying to analyse the various stages of mystical development as presented by Teresa of Avila, which he then uses as a basis for his philosophical discussion about the relationship between experience and interpretation in mystical experiences. However, since he has already assumed that what is of fundamental importance is the experiential psychological states of the mystic, his whole account is focused upon those states and their similarities and differences. He never asks whether this is the right focus, or whether it might seriously distort what the mystic herself considered to be essential.

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At one point, to be sure, Pike comes very close to seeing that his concern is not the concern of the people whom he is discussing. In his Preface, he asks, 'What, then, do we find when we turn to the primary literature?' and in response he says,

> Comments about the states of union are often embedded in contexts in which mystics are less concerned to describe features of mystical phenomena than to extol the majesty of God, decry the sinful states of the soul, warn against the dangers of deception, etc. (1992: xii)

Exactly so; we shall see ample evidence of this in the chapters that follow. But instead of taking this as a warning that the project of philosophical analysis of mysticism strictly in terms of psychological states might be misguided, Pike simply takes it as adding to the difficulty which a philosopher who discusses mysticism must face. The central question which he sets himself is, 'What is it to experience union with God?' And he immediately adds the following gloss: 'More precisely, what are the experiential or phenomenological features of the various experiences traditionally included in the union class?' (x). Union with God is simply *assumed* to be a subjective psychological state. Accordingly, there is no consideration of moral issues, for example, let alone of the social and political context in which certain people were allowed to count as mystics while others were not. It is as if Teresa of Avila, as well as Jan van Ruusbroec and Eckhart and other mystics whom he discusses, could have 'experiences of God' that could be known and identified as such without any reference to the ecclesiastical and social climate in which they were living, and can usefully be analysed by a modern philosopher of religion strictly in terms of the psychological phenomena involved.

Similarly, Bernard McGinn, in a long theoretical appendix to his *Foundations of Mysticism* (1991) cites a variety of writers, among them Dean Inge (1925), Cuthbert Butler (1967) and Louis Dupré (1987) all of whom deplore the lack of precision and consequent misuse of the term. Nevertheless, McGinn proceeds to outline major philosophical, theological and psychological approaches to mysticism since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It soon becomes clear that although he too would wish for a more precise and consistent usage of the word, McGinn, like most of the

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authors he considers, from Ritschl (1887) to Von Balthasar (1982) and from William James (1960) to Philip Almond (1982) sees mysticism essentially in terms of intense, private, subjective experiences, and that it is these experiences whose significance must be studied if we are to grasp the meaning and value of mysticism. Indeed, what is striking is that although the evaluations of mysticism among the writers he cites range from complete dismissal and contempt to enthusiastic endorsement, there is virtual agreement that what they are talking about is an intense psychological state, whether described as direct experience of the presence of God, or as visions, locutions or other extraordinary phenomena. It is this direct experience upon which McGinn himself chooses to focus, even though he recognises the problematic nature of the terms he uses. As he puts it,

> Rather than trying to define mysticism (any simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian), I prefer to give a sense of how I understand the term by discussing it under three headings: 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)

It is clear, however, that the third of these three headings must be the decisive one. Without the idea of a 'direct consciousness of the presence of God' McGinn would hardly consider any process or way of life or element of religion as mystical. It is the implicit incorporation of that direct consciousness, and hence a psychological state, into the other headings that makes it appropriate to consider them as aspects of what may be meant by mysticism.

This assumption of its subjective and psychological nature is a regular occurrence in the current philosophical discussion of mysticism. John Hick, in *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989: 165) discusses the question of whether the mystical experiences of adherents of various world religions are at their core the same: he does not question the basic understanding of mysticism as centrally involving a subjective state of consciousness, usually brief in duration, and quite different from ordinary consciousness. Similarly Michael Stoeber, in his interesting search for a mystical theodicy, characterises an 'authentic' mystic as one who 'grants

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the experiences extraordinary status as a central premise of his or her life' (1992b: 80). Again, most of the contributors to Steven Katz's new volume on *Mysticism and Language* (1992) assume that mystical experience is an intense subjective state: the discussion is not about that, but about the extent to which such a state is expressible in language. These recent authors are only following a long line of writers, among them Anthony O'Hear (1984), J. L. Mackie (1982) and Richard Swinburne (1979) who, ever since William James, have seen mystical experience as essentially involving the four characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity (James 1960: 367), even while fundamentally disagreeing with one another about the significance of such experiences.

I have argued elsewhere that this characterisation of mysticism bears little resemblance to what was considered important by those who are taken as the paradigm mystics of the Christian tradition: people like Bernard of Clairvaux, Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross (Jantzen 1989; 1990). It is relatively easy to show that as Nelson Pike suspects, the preoccupation of modern philosophers with the alleged intense psychological states of consciousness is a serious distortion of what the mystics themselves desired or held important. And a little further investigation reveals that much of the modern construction of mysticism derives from an attempt to circumvent Kantian strictures on epistemology, strictures whose effect would be to render veridical religious experience impossible.

Kant's understanding of rationality and his theory of knowledge stands at the summit of what can be termed the Enlightenment project. In his view, human knowledge can never extend to knowledge of things as they are in themselves; the best we can hope for is accurate knowledge of things as they appear to us. Knowledge of ultimate reality, including knowledge of God, must therefore remain forever beyond human capability: we can never circumvent the categories of our perception which entail that any human experience will be seen strictly in their terms. The price of the Enlightenment project of making the human subject the centre and foundation of all knowledge is that knowledge of transcendent reality is forever foreclosed.

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Postmodern theorists have taken this centrality of the rational subject as one of the most objectionable aspects of modernity; and much has been written about 'the death of the subject'. Whether this is to be welcomed or not is another question: feminists in particular have reason to be wary of announcements of the 'death of autonomous man' in a world in which autonomous women have hardly had a chance to be born (Braidotti 1991; Flax 1990b). I hope to return to that discussion on another occasion; for the moment, what is significant is that contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion remain largely untouched by postmodern concerns, and conduct their discussion of mysticism, wittingly or not, under the long shadow of Kant. Central to their definition of mysticism, therefore, is the work of Schleiermacher and William James, who tried to retrieve religious and mystical experience from Kantian strictures by seeing such experiences as unique, intense, subjective states of consciousness occurring 'on the verges of the mind' (James 1960: 406), different from normal consciousness and thus escaping Kant's critical theory. Not all modern philosophers acknowledge their indebtedness to Schleiermacher and James; but it is clear that without their emphasis on the subjectivity of religious experience generally and mystical experience in particular, contemporary discussion would be very different. I will return to these points in chapter 8.

The classical mystics of the Christian tradition had not read Kant, and their preoccupations were quite different from what one might think if one read only modern philosophical discussion of mysticism. Even when mystics did speak of experience, what they were focusing on was something much broader and more nuanced than is captured by the characteristics given by James and accepted by subsequent philosophers. Moreover, they cannot all be piled into one monolithic heap, as though their experiences and concerns were all very much alike. As I shall show, even the idea of who should count as a mystic and what should be seen as genuine spirituality changed greatly within western Christianity. Furthermore, the evolving understanding of the mystical was inextricably linked with evolving gender relations; and in this as in so much else, men in power made the rules, often in ways that would increase their own authority at the expense of women. In

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fact, as we shall see, female mystics were much more concerned with visions and locutions and intense experiences than were most male mystics. Indeed, the disparagement of intense experiences on the part of these men can be read as an attempt to discredit the women visionaries and the authority they claimed. Ironically, post-Kantian characterisations of mysticism are more accurate to female than to male mystics; though the reasons for this are far from congenial either to contemporary feminists or to the female mystics in question.

Modern philosophers, concerned with the issues of rationality and epistemology which are central to the Enlightenment project, and considering mysticism in terms of intense experiences, are deeply concerned with questions of truth and evidence. Should accounts of mystical experiences be believed? Do they count as evidence for the existence of God? Can mystical experience be put into words? To what extent is a mystical experience determined by the social and cultural context of the mystic, and to what extent does it transcend it? Could there be a mystical core of religion – an inward, personal experience that people in all religions have in common, though it is then overlaid with culture-specific beliefs and practices (Katz 1978)?

When we put these philosophical concerns side by side with the writings of the mystics, one of the most glaring first impressions is that they have very little to do with one another. The concerns which the mystics addressed are not the questions which contemporary philosophers are asking. The mystics of the western Christian tradition lived in a thought world where God's existence was taken for granted. For the most part, the fact that there were religions other than Christianity was either ignored, or, as in the case of Muslims and Jews, increasingly seen as threatening. Although many mystical writers were deeply interested in language and its uses, their interest bears little resemblance to modern philosophical concerns about the alleged ineffability of mystical experience, and has far more to do with exploring resources of language to convey what they wanted to express about the rich diversity of God. All these themes deserve full exploration, some of which will occur in the following chapters, while others must wait for another occasion. The point

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is that it is plain that the preoccupations of most modern philosophical interpreters of mysticism were not the preoccupations of the mystics themselves; and often the philosophers do not even seem to notice. Standard approaches to mystical writings and to the lives of the mystics have imposed on them categories which fit into the systems of modern philosophical thinking, but removed them from the concerns of justice and liberation.

Sometimes it is even argued that such concerns could not properly belong to the mystics. Spirituality, it is held, is private. It has to do with the inner, subjective relation of the soul to God. Social justice, by contrast, is necessarily public, seeking to bring about at political and structural levels conditions which will foster the dignity of each individual and the welfare of the community. The spiritual and the social are therefore opposites: concentration on one means to that extent letting go of the other. Thus it is argued by John Passmore (1970), for example, that Christian mysticism is fundamentally at odds with humanitarian ethics. The goal of Christian spirituality, in his view, is to love God with one's whole being. This means that insofar as human beings are to be loved and their welfare sought, they are to be loved only for God's sake rather than for their own intrinsic worth. Above all, seeking their good must never be allowed to become a distraction from the higher occupation of the loving contemplation of God.

Passmore points out that in the history of Christian spirituality, the biblical story of Mary and Martha was endlessly retold: Martha was the type of active Christian full of humanitarian concern, while Mary cultivated her inward spirit in attentiveness to God. Although in the Bible Martha is not portrayed as doing anything wrong, her choice is definitely at a lower spiritual level than the purely contemplative lifestyle of Mary, who was not 'cumbered about with much serving'. Passmore suggests that in the mystics' emphasis on detachment from all else to devote themselves solely to the love of God, there is a fundamental spiritual egotism which precludes real care for others. In the end, in Passmore's view one must choose between the first and the second of the great commandments: the love of God and the love of neighbour are finally incompatible.

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