

Introduction

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In the ninth book of the *Confessions*, the Christian bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430) writes of an experience he shared with his mother, Monica. The two were in Italy, preparing to travel back to their native North Africa. One day, deep in conversation, they wondered “what the eternal life of the saints would be like,” concluding “that no bodily pleasure, however great it might be and whatever earthly light might shed luster upon it, was worthy of comparison, or even of mention, beside the happiness of the life of the saints.” As they spoke, Augustine tells us, “the flame of love burned stronger” in them and raised them “higher toward the eternal God.” Their thoughts ranged over all material things up to the heavens, and then beyond the material heavens to their own souls.

Yet for Augustine and Monica, the “eternal life of the saints” lay beyond even the realm of immaterial souls, in a place of “everlasting peace” governed by Wisdom. And so, Augustine explains, as he and his mother

spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, leaving our spiritual harvest bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending – far, far different from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself forever, yet never grows old and gives new life to all things.¹

Augustine and Monica ascend together through the material and immaterial realms and then further upward, from the realm of the soul to that of the divine Word.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1961), bk. IX, sec. 10, pp. 197–8.

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Augustine's account demonstrates his abiding debt to Neoplatonism. The pagan philosopher Plotinus (d. 270) describes the soul's movement into, through, and beyond itself to the universal Soul, from thence to Mind, and ultimately back into the One from which all things emanate and to which they aspire to return.² At the time of the vision at Ostia, however, Augustine was a committed Christian, and while he maintained crucial aspects of the Neoplatonic philosophical view, he also insisted on the necessity of divine mediation in order for the uplifting and return of the soul to its source to occur. Elsewhere he emphasizes the centrality of the incarnate Christ. Here he writes of Christ as the Word and as Wisdom. For Plotinus, the creation of all things occurs through the emanation of the One into the Mind, the Mind into Soul, the Soul into individual souls, and all into the realm of material creation. Augustine, as a Christian, insists that creation occurs directly through Christ as the Word who "gives new life to all things," and it is to this Word that all things will return.

Known as the vision at Ostia after the town in Italy in which the event occurred, this passage encapsulates themes that will play a vital role in the development of Western Christianity.³ Four features, standing in dialectical relation to what might, at first sight, appear to be their opposites, lie at the heart of the Christian mystical life.⁴ First, Augustine describes himself and his mother engaging in a process of uplifting and transcendence. For Augustine this process is grounded in the intellect, although love, signified here by the heart, is also crucial. Augustine emphasizes the transcendence of God and the transcending or uplifting

² For more on Neoplatonic theories of procession and return, see Andrew Louth's essay in this volume.

³ Scholars continue to debate whether Augustine should be considered a mystic, with much hinging on what that designation is taken to entail. See Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 229–31 and the literature cited there.

⁴ There have been many attempts to provide a phenomenological description of the primary feature of mysticism, and related attempts to create typologies of different kinds of mysticism. The most famous of the descriptive accounts is perhaps that of William James, which shares features with what I describe here. For James, mysticism is *always* marked by its ineffability and noetic quality; it is also often transient and passive. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin 1982 [1902]), pp. 380–2. I not only highlight slightly different features but also stress their constant interplay with what might, at first sight, appear to be their opposites. Hence I attempt to hold together the enormous range of phenomena that has been designated, either in premodern Christianity or in modernity, as mystical, without creating evaluative typologies or simply rejecting out of hand certain kinds of experience as inessential or representative of false mysticism.

motion of souls to God; others will double God's transcendence with claims to God's immanence to the soul in visionary or unitive experience. Centuries later, the Dominican preacher and theologian Meister Eckhart (d. 1328) will go even further, taking the Neoplatonic structure of emanation and return as the basis for the claim that God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent to all things.

Second, Augustine and Monica touch transcendent Wisdom only fleetingly. Throughout the course of Christian history, most of those who claim to have some experience of God's presence or of union with God admit, and often bemoan, the transience of such events insofar as they occur in human time. Others, however, claim to have more lasting rapturous engagements with God or, even more controversially, will claim to attain a permanent state of annihilation of the self and of unity with the divine ground of all things – a unity in which they share in God's eternal now. This view, which appears to have been held by the beguine Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), may have played a role in her condemnation. Yet it is one that will continue to resurface within the Christian tradition.

Third, Augustine explicitly contrasts his and his mother's momentary grasp of the divine Word to human speech. Augustine and Monica know that they are no longer touching Wisdom when they return "to the sound of [their] own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending." Human speech, unlike the divine Word, is temporal. In time, things have a beginning and an ending, whereas the divine Word is eternal and "abides in himself forever, yet never grows old." The limitation of human language for God is a recurrent theme within the Christian tradition and one that is often tied to the question of temporality. Yet there is also the need to find a language with which to praise God. In Augustine's discussion of his experience with his mother at Ostia, he points to the limitations of human speech to encompass divine Wisdom in part through a proliferation of metaphors from the realms of sight, taste, hearing, and thought. The interplay between the use of sensory images and intellectual concepts to name God and claims to God's unnameability lies at the heart of the Christian mystical tradition.

Finally, the experience recounted in the *Confessions* is deeply communal. Augustine comes to the Word in and through his conversation with his mother. They "reach out and touch" divine Wisdom together, and together they fall back into human speech, the "region of unlikeness" in which creatures live until they come to eternal life in God. Moreover, they name that which they seek in communal terms, speaking together of the "eternal life of the saints." For Augustine and Monica, to touch the Word is to touch and share in the life of the saints – the life

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of all those saved by Christ – and so to be part of a community grounded in God. Moreover, here and in other texts, Augustine emphasizes the importance of community and communal practice in the soul's movement toward God. Among Augustine's forebears and contemporaries, however, were those who claimed that the life of Christian perfection was best sought in solitude. How to bring this desire for solitude together with the communal nature of Christian life will be a recurring question, one that will play a central role in moments of rupture and transformation within the tradition.

In one scene, then, we find many of the most abiding and contentious aspects of the Christian mystical tradition, particularly as it is lived and practiced in the West from the third through the sixteenth centuries, the geographical and temporal focus of this volume.⁵ In each instance, Augustine's description entails a position with regard to the nature of the human being's experience of God that borrows from the past and from his contemporaries and will be taken up by subsequent writers, either directly from Augustine or from other early Christian and pagan philosophical sources. In the texts and images discussed throughout this volume, we find a near constant interplay between God's transcendence and God's immanence in the experience of mystical vision, contemplation, or union; the transience of created time and the eternity of God; the necessity of naming God in order to praise God and the unnameability of God and, with that, of any experience of God; and the communal and the solitary nature of the pursuit of the Christian life.

Modern scholarship on Christian mysticism – and on mysticism understood as a more general religious phenomenon – often attempts to control its subject by emphasizing some features over others. Even more marked is the tendency to reduce complex phenomena, such as the interplay between transcendence and immanence or that between the communal and the individual, to one side of the pair, in the process often making evaluative judgments about what is central and what is peripheral to the mystical life or, even more damningly, what constitutes "true" as opposed to "false" mysticism.⁶ As Veerle Fraeters, Dyan Elliott,

⁵ Although a number of the essays collected here deal with early Christian materials from the East, the fate of the mystical and mysticism in medieval and modern Eastern Christianity unfortunately lies outside of the scope of the volume. For reflections on the distortions to which this leads, see Louth's essay in this volume.

⁶ So, e.g., James omits "visual and auditory hallucinations," among other phenomena, because he deems them insufficiently "illuminative" to count as an essential aspect of the mystical life. James is far from alone in his desire to discount such experiences, although he has his own reasons for doing so. See James, *Varieties*, p. 408, n. 2.

Bernard McGinn, and Alison Weber show in their essays in this volume, this is a move that begins, at least in the West, during the Middle Ages. The goal of this book is to work against such simplifying maneuvers and so to insist on the various and multiple experiences of God recounted within a wide range of Christian texts.

There is a certain paradoxical quality to this enterprise, for the term mysticism that governs it and that names the canon of texts to which the volume attends is absent from almost all of the material it is taken to describe. Derived from the Greek, *muo*, which means to close, particularly the eyes, the adjectives mystic and mystical and the adverb mystically were used to modify an array of practices within the ancient Greek mystery religions, Greek Neoplatonic philosophy, and, most lastingly, Christianity. They then moved seamlessly from Greek into Latin and from thence into the Western European vernaculars. In their earliest Greek and Latin uses, mystic and mystical simply meant hidden.

According to Louis Bouyer, who offers the most detailed account of early usages, early Christian writers borrow the term from the Greek mystery religions in order to name the hidden reality underlying scripture and liturgy – namely, Jesus Christ, the reference of the most seemingly mundane and the most obscure biblical texts and the constant presence underlying the ritual life of Christian communities. Bouyer argues that only with Origen (d. 254) does an understanding of the mystical as a particular mode of theologizing or spiritual practice emerge. Origen designates as mystical the knowledge produced through allegorical interpretations of the Bible, because in such interpretation one seeks to uncover meanings hidden in or even by the literal meaning of the text.⁷ This usage also marks a shift toward the experiential. The process by which one comes to know hidden things is designated as mystical rather than the things uncovered themselves. In uncovering the hidden meaning of scripture, by moving from what Origen calls the body (the literal meaning) of the text to its soul and spirit (both aspects of the allegorical), one is lifted up through the body to the soul and to that universal spirit in which we all share.⁸

Over the course of early and Western medieval Christian history, the experiential aspect of biblical interpretation takes on a life of its own. Increasingly we find the term mystical used to name not only Christ

⁷ For more on the allegorical method of biblical interpretation, see E. Ann Matter's essay in this volume.

⁸ See Louis Bouyer, "Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word," in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NJ: Image Books, 1980), pp. 42–55.

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and Christ's teaching, which are the hidden truth of scripture, and the Eucharist (in which Christ is hidden under the visible bread and wine), but also stages of contemplation (in Greek, *theoria* and in Latin, *contemplatio*) leading to the vision of God, the vision of God itself, union with God (Greek, *henosis* and Latin, *unitas*), and theology (*theologia*, a Greek term taken over directly into Latin).⁹ Early, medieval, and early modern Christian writers referred to all of these things as mystical, and it is to this array of practices – of mystical interpretation of scripture, mystical vision, mystical contemplation, mystical union, and mystical theology – that the substantive term mysticism, which begins to appear in the Western European vernaculars during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, refers.

The story of the modern articulation of the category of mysticism is only beginning to be written.¹⁰ But what recurs in much of the modern literature is a tendency to emphasize transcendence, ineffability, and individuality and to understand mysticism as embracing inwardness and

⁹ See McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, esp. pp. 102, 105, 124, 128, 144, 171, 177, 210, and 252.

¹⁰ There is, moreover, likely more than one story. For France, see Michel de Certeau, "'Mystique' au XVII^e siècle: Le problème de langage 'mystique,'" in *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts à Père Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Aubier, 1964), vol. 2, pp. 267–91; Michel de Certeau, "Mystic Speech," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 80–100; Michel de Certeau, "Mysticism," *Diacritics* 22 (1992): 11–25; and Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 72–112. On Germany, see Niklaus Largier, "Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience," *Representations* 105 (2009): 37–60. Regarding the Anglophone world, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2002): 273–302. Schmidt is right that a number of scholars – including Certeau – move too quickly from Certeau's claims about the emergence of the term mysticism (*mystique*) in seventeenth-century French Roman Catholic circles to its deployment by twentieth-century students of mysticism such as James and Evelyn Underhill. There is a "gaping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hole" in this genealogy, and Schmidt's essay plugs in crucial pieces of the Anglo-American story. The interplay among (minimally) French-, Spanish-, Italian-, German-, Dutch-, and English-language discussions, and among theology, philosophy, and literature requires further research and analysis before we can begin to get a clear picture of whence and to what ends mysticism came to play such a vital role in modern religious studies, including theology, and in modern religious life. At the same time, it is necessary to insist that the word group does not limit the phenomenon. Practices and experiences often referred to in Christian texts as mystical also regularly occur without that specific appellation. After the Reformation, the term is used as often as one of abuse as of approbation, and yet the phenomena and the theological issues surrounding them by no means disappear. We need to avoid the mistake, then, of confusing word with concept and experience.

rejecting external forms.¹¹ For reasons that contemporary scholarship has yet fully to uncover, with the use of the substantive mysticism, and the notion of mystical theology as a specific mode of doing theology that stands independent of historical, biblical, or dogmatic theology, the Christian mystical tradition is often disengaged from the practices of biblical exegesis, liturgy, prayer, and contemplation with which it was always intimately bound in pre- and early modern Western Christianity.¹² The essays collected here insist that we return to a careful consideration of the specific forms of life within which and of the religious practices in the context of which the dialectical interplay between transcendence and immanence, time and eternity, naming and unnameability, and community and individuality that marks the Christian mystical life emerge and develop.¹³

Early, medieval, and early modern Christian mysticism can best be understood as a series of ongoing experiential, communal, and textual commentaries on and debates about the possibilities and limitations of encounters between God and humanity as they occur within history, the time and the place of the human as it is disrupted by the eternal God. The complex interplay between immanence and transcendence, time and eternity, nameability and unnameability, and community and individuality can best be articulated when due attention is given to the vital role of practice in Christian life. For in early, medieval, and early modern Christianity, the mystical senses, mystical visions, mystical contemplation, and mystical union took place, in the words of Niklaus Largier, “in the context of regulated forms of reading, preaching, prayer, and above all in the reading of scriptures and in the liturgical forms

¹¹ In many cases, in the very process of describing mysticism as marked by inwardness, transcendence, and ineffability, the very outward and communal practices supposedly antithetical to it are also described – Bible reading, hymn singing, communal exhortations, and engagement with the natural world. There are excellent examples of this in James, *Varieties*.

¹² Following Michel de Certeau’s work, it has become common to refer to this tradition as retroactively constituted. Certainly a specific canon of texts is associated with the new coinage, mysticism, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet recent work on textual transmission and translation suggests that a mystical canon was already in place by at least the later Middle Ages. See Newman and Poor in this volume.

¹³ Although Schmidt suggests that a distinction can be made between the history of the term within the “study of religion” and “its genealogy as part of a history of Christian theology and exegesis,” our suspicion is that the more we know about how the term mysticism is deployed across an array of languages, disciplines, and Christian and non-Christian communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the more that distinction will erode. See Schmidt, “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism,’” p. 275, n. 1.

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that enact, recall, and perform aspects of the scriptures and provide a general ... framework" for their interpretation.¹⁴

The phenomena grouped under the term mysticism, then, should first be approached in their specific historical settings, as that provides us with the best possibility of understanding these practices on something like the terms in which they were understood by those who wrote and lived them.¹⁵ The monastic traditions in which these terms first occur were, from the beginning, attempts to generate the conditions and provide the practices by means of which monks and nuns, alone and in community, might best attain the life of Christian perfection, a perfection repeatedly named and described in terms of God's transforming presence.

For this reason, "Part I: Contexts" opens the book with four essays meant to give readers an understanding of the historically located forms of religious life in which mysticism emerged. What it means to be a Christian is always subject to debate, and in the periods covered by this volume, the ideals of Christian life were hotly contested. To be described as mystical was almost always to be associated with the highest aspects of the Christian life – hence the ideal form of life was very often the mystical one. But what this entailed changed over time, as the mystical life generated within the monasteries of the ancient and medieval Christian world gradually came to spread outside of the monastery walls, first to new religious orders and eventually to the laity.

Many of the practices and terms central to Western Christian mysticism emerge in the context of monasticism and the various reforms of the religious life that occur during the Middle Ages. "Part II: Key Terms" draws out some of the most vital of these, focusing on vocabulary central to early and medieval Christian articulations of the religious life. The writers to whom we attend throughout the volume wrote with great care. It is essential to listen carefully to their specific dialects, track the

¹⁴ Largier, "Mysticism, Modernity," p. 40.

¹⁵ In addition, we believe that this kind of historical work is the necessary condition for comparative study, whether across historical moments or religious traditions. The use of the term mystical to modify a range of phenomena associated with the religious life occurs most influentially and most lastingly in Christianity. Attempts to provide a general account of mysticism with transhistorical and interreligious power depend, therefore, on careful attention to the specificity of the Christian phenomena that are first described as mystical. Our intuition is that the most fruitful sites of comparison across the history of Christianity and between Christianity and other religions will be neither doctrinal nor phenomenological, but rather practical. The kinds of practices in which people pursue the religious life are likely to provide the most apt grounds for comparative work.

interrelationship between key concepts and practices, and show how terms function differently in different historical contexts.

“Part III: Contemporary Questions” turns to modern terms of analysis – or in some cases terms of analysis that, while available in one form or another in earlier historical moments, are so laden with contemporary presuppositions as to render a theoretically self-reflexive approach necessary. (We are thinking here of authority, the body and its senses, and vision – the latter of which is notably covered in both Parts II and III, albeit in quite different ways.) All of our historicist desires should not blind us to the fact that we ask our questions of old texts, questions that at times have only very faint analogues in the past. These engagements are vital to the ongoing making of – and often salutary breaks with – tradition.

The volume can be read and used in multiple ways. Some might choose to focus on particular temporal periods as they cut across the volume; others might want to work through the chronological chapters and then focus on issues of particular concern to them. Throughout, authors point to central primary sources, and we hope that the volume will be used in conjunction with the writings of the mystics. The volume was structured as a whole, but one with detachable parts, and there is no one way to link them. It is also marked by crucial absences. There is little attention to the Christian East after the sixth century or to Western developments after the eighteenth century. The size and scope of this volume did not allow of expansion to these essential aspects of the story of Christian mysticism. Both topics deserve their own volumes, the first a companion to this that focuses on Eastern Christian mysticism, the second a follow-up or continuation of the work done here that would tell the story of the mystical life in modernity. What follows, then, is meant only as a partial and imperfect guide to the riches provided by the essays themselves, with some indication of where future work might lead.

Chapter 1, “Early Monasticism,” opens the book with Douglas Burton-Christie’s account of some of the earliest and most formative texts from the monastic tradition. Burton-Christie emphasizes the ways in which the heights of spiritual experience are described within these writings as rooted “in a common life” and incorporated “into the texture and rhythms of daily living” (p. 4). The teachings of the desert fathers and mothers, as they come down to us through collections of sayings and lives, describe the regular and structured recitation of scripture, disciplined ascetic practice, and the practices of prayer, meditation, and contemplation by means of which monks and nuns struggle to be

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transformed in Christ. As Burton-Christie explains, “the early Christian monks were convinced that the practice of holding the Word at the center of one’s consciousness led gradually toward a living encounter with the One speaking in and through the text” (p. 55) of scripture. Through this engagement with God’s living Word, moreover, one might come to pure prayer – the contemplation of God alone. Hence we see already in early Christianity the interplay between speech and silence, the naming and unnamings of God that will run throughout the Christian tradition.

Amy Hollywood picks up the story of Christian monasticism in Chapter 2, “Song, Experience, and the Book in Benedictine Monasticism.” Hollywood focuses on Western monasticism, which was largely governed by the sixth-century *Rule of Benedict*. The *Rule*, she argues, set the conditions within which the mystical life was pursued during much of the Western Middle Ages. Hollywood points to the centrality of communal prayer and reading to the monastic life and notes that early and medieval monastic texts wrote of experience (*experientia*) as the site of affective, intellectual, and spiritual transformation through the life of prayer. At the heart of the monastic life, both Burton-Christie and Hollywood show, lies the recitation of the Psalms. For monastic authors like John Cassian (d. ca. 435), whose *Institutes* and *Conferences* were required reading for monks and nuns living according to the *Rule of Benedict*, the recitation of the Psalms made it possible for “every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, ... [to] be God.” Only then, according to Cassian, will the unity that exists between the Father and the Son “be carried over into our understanding and our mind so that, just as he loves us with a sincere and pure and indissoluble love, we too may be joined to him with a perpetual and inseparable love and so united with him that whatever we breathe, whatever we understand, whatever we speak, may be God.”¹⁶

Hollywood goes on to show that the practices of prayer integral to Benedictine monasticism continued to play a role in the lives of those who seek spiritual grace, even among the laity and semireligious. This theme is further articulated in Chapter 3, “New Forms of Religious Life in Medieval Western Europe.” Walter Simon’s essay presents the range of new forms of religious life that emerged over the course of the late eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. Fueled in part by

¹⁶ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1997) conf. 10, ch. 7, pp. 375–6; and John Cassian, *Conférences*, ed. Dom E. Pichery (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1955–9), vol. 2, conf. 10, ch. 7, p. 81.