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Introduction

Transcendent experience in history

This book is about an important body of writings, written or read in England between the Norman Conquest and the Reformation, which theorize, teach, or perform a personal address to, experience of, or relationship with God. The book's title refers to these works as *mysticism*, but this word defines only part of the book's scope. A fuller account requires several other keywords: *devotional, affective, visionary*, and most notably *contemplative*, used as the book's defining generic term, for reasons that will become clear. How we think of these keywords influences both the approach we take to the field and the writings we assume to define it.

Used together, *mysticism* and its companions draw attention to two features of the writings they describe. First, these writings are phenomenological, concerning individual felt experience in addition to systems of knowledge or belief. Second, they represent this experience as transcendent, involving an encounter – whether direct or mediated, transformatively powerful or paradoxically everyday – with God. The terms thus affirm a cosmology in which the idea of 'transcendent experience' is neither meaningless nor contradictory. In this cosmology, even though God is taken to exist beyond the order of creation, he is also accessible to it, even immanent within it, interacting with it directly and communicating with it, not only in formal and predictable ways – such as through religious rituals and the institutions that undergird them – but with apparent spontaneity and by way, at least on occasion, of mysteriously selected individuals.

In a sense, such a cosmology is necessary to all forms of Christian belief. Even Christian cultures in which religious experience has been a source of anxiety – such as eighteenth-century Anglicanism, with its rationalist fear of Nonconformist 'enthusiasm', born of the previous century's record of violent religious conflict – have recognized the necessity of an experiential relationship with God. This is partly because the experience of God is

understood as a proof of God's existence, the source of the event called *conversion*. But it is also because the Christian forms of such experience assert two of the doctrines by means of which the religion defines itself against its rivals, from polytheism to Neoplatonism, to Judaism and Islam, to Deism. The first doctrine is that each individual human soul is made in the Trinitarian image of God, mirroring the divine likeness; and the belief that God has, in turn, chosen to be made in the image of the human, entering the order of creation in the incarnate Christ, that 'scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles' (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Yet the medieval culture that produced this corpus of writings not only had a distinctive account of such experience, understanding the relationship between the soul and God available through contemplation in a newly bodily and emotionally laden way. This culture also took such experience with special seriousness, making it increasingly central to religious life as the period wore on, devoting considerable literary, visual, and human resources to it, reposing extraordinary trust in its validity, and in the process permanently shaping the sensibilities, and (to a considerable extent) even the content, of western Christianity.

This last truth has not been widely recognized. Modern Protestant and Catholic Christians are much influenced by the emphasis on a personal relationship with God first promoted by an evangelical movement that traces its revivalist roots to the very 'enthusiasm' abhorred by eighteenth-century Anglicans. Even Catholics, however, tend to be unaware that the ultimate source of evangelical pietism is the affective reworking of the Christian faith in medieval contemplative thought and practice. From its devotional focus on the objects and people connected with the birth of Jesus – the stable, crib, ox, ass, shepherds, angels, and wise men featured on Christmas cards – to its theological emphasis on the human person of Jesus, to its soteriological insistence that salvation begins with personal acceptance of Christ as saviour: modern Christian language, practice, and even theology, before it is Lutheran or Wesleyan, is massively and unsuspectingly medieval. Indeed, its very ignorance of this fact is an effect of the epochal events that brought the medieval period to a violent close. The beginnings of the late-medieval tradition of affective contemplative thought in the eleventh century are mysterious. But there is nothing mysterious about the sixteenth-century end of the tradition, as English religious reformers determinedly destroyed or turned their backs on most of the texts and artefacts which had nurtured what remained a strong strain of its piety, while Catholics read only medieval texts that seemed least 'Protestant', most different from the heresies that had sprung up around them, or at least most in tune with their own, suddenly more anxious, doctrinal orthodoxies.

Despite its antiquity and stance of worldly disengagement, medieval contemplative writing is thus an often unconsciously politicized field, which readers with even a residually Christian background approach with more latent knowledge than they may realize, and which scholarship – its attitudes to the field even now inflected by categories inherited from the sixteenth century – has difficulty analysing without prejudice (that most telling indicator of our collective acts of intellectual repression). In the body of this book, the most important solution to the problem of prejudice is historicization. After this chapter, subsequent chapters move, period by period, from the first phases of post-Conquest contemplative thought to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, into the early history of the reception of this thought in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The scope of these chapters – like their generic breadth, their attention to writings in all three of medieval England's main languages, and their alternating focus on texts and on contexts – indeed itself constitutes an attack on prejudice. They seek to decenter a field too often narrowly understood as focused around a smallish group of Middle English works of the mid-fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries whose characteristic themes are taken to have been distinctive to that seventy-five year period and rendered abruptly irrelevant by the Reformation. This introductory chapter is also concerned with history, especially that of the field and its terminology. But its principal interests are methodological. Its job is to ask questions such as: what, from the perspective of the English Middle Ages, is mystical or contemplative writing? What, if anything, makes it into a coherent area of enquiry? And what, if any, is its claim upon our attention?

One set of answers to these questions, well-established in the scholarship, is phenomenological and theological. Mystical writing is a record of individual religious experience, which is coherent in as much as the direct apprehension of God has distinctive features (at least, within a given theological tradition), and merits interest simply by dint of being real (whether in a psychological or a theological sense). The long history of this approach to contemplative writing is our concern in the next section of this chapter. Reports of individual experiences feel immediate, even when they are centuries in the past – an historically contingent cultural fact about ourselves whose own past includes the very contemplative traditions under scrutiny here, which helped create the category of experience whose interest we now take for granted. The phenomenological approach still has a hold, even over those whose thinking is not explicitly theological. Despite the theoretical problems associated with using texts as windows that open onto experience, especially individual experience, not to mention the problems involved in discussing religious experience in particular, elements of this

approach remains indispensable to any study of contemplative writing, and are in evidence throughout this book.

The present chapter, however, offers another, carefully secular, approach to the field of contemplative writing, one partly inflected by general intellectual history but more importantly concerned with the history of thought about a specific cultural practice: the practice of *otium*, or private leisure, a term anciently associated with contemplation. It prefers this approach for two reasons. First, the idea of practice can act as a useful bridge between texts and experiences (or texts and their historical functions). Second, such an approach can view even a private experience like contemplation – an experience which, in its own account of itself, reaches beyond this world towards eternity – as part of a wider cultural field: as profoundly imbricated, despite its declared status as otherworldly and private, in the political, the social, and the ethical. *Otium*, for example, had further associations with pleasure, as well as with choice, privilege, reward, and the gratuitous: all terms relevant to the history of contemplation which also have functions in different cultural discourses. For reasons to be explored now, the scholarly field of medieval contemplative writing has had prolonged difficulty deciding on either its terminology or its canon. Besides serving as an appropriate point of entry into the historically oriented studies that follow, this chapter's concern with contemplative writing as an expression of *otium* thus also makes a proposal about how this field might frame itself more clearly.

Mystical theology and spirituality studies

Why should such a proposal be necessary? As this volume and the professional training of its contributors testify, in the last thirty years the study of medieval English contemplative thought has become, to a marked degree, a subset of literary and historical studies: a standard, secular university discipline within the area of medieval studies. However, the field owes its formation to spirituality studies: an early twentieth-century discipline, which brought insights from the new fields of psychology and sociology to bear on the much older, specifically Catholic, discipline of mystical theology. Both these intimately related religious disciplines add a great deal to the historical study of contemplative writing, not least because they can bring an urgency of informed attention to this writing secular historians cannot easily match. But their terminology and operating assumptions also exert pressures on this study. This is partly for reasons local to medieval England, partly because, despite the historical sophistication of which both are capable, their final concern is with the transcendent: with that which lies beyond, not within, history. The pressures these disciplines exert have had, and continue to have,

real effects on the historical study of English contemplative writing, in ways that, perhaps out of mere politeness, are seldom discussed and to an extent that is seldom appreciated. To grasp why these effects might be significant enough to require historians of contemplative writing to exercise special care in framing and naming their subject, a truncated history of the two disciplines and their relation to the field is in order.

Mystical theology analyses writings from the Early Church to the present and draws on a number of medieval contemplative theologians for its basic categories. Its tripartite division of the ascent to God into purgative, illuminative, and unitive phases, for example, is indebted to Bonaventure's *De triplici via* (*On the Triple Way*) (1260s).[1] Indeed, mystical theology's canon of orthodox mystics and its counter-canon of mystical heretics is so heavy with medieval names – Bernard and the Victorines through to Ruusbroec in the first category; Marguerite Porete, often Eckhart, and the so-called Brethren of the Free Spirit in the second – that it would be proper to describe the discipline as an outgrowth of medieval contemplative theology. Yet mystical theology began to take its modern shape as a discipline only in the early seventeenth century, especially in the commentaries that accrued around the Spanish Carmelite mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (d. 1582, 1591). These systematized various medieval contemplative theologies in order to harmonize them, so far as possible, with the strict new orthodoxies of the Counter-Reformation. In the process, they necessarily disrupted the continuities and narrowed the range of the theologies on which they built – theologies first developed in France, Germany, the Low Countries, Italy, and Spain, but not, it is important to note, England – transforming what had been a diverse series of arts of contemplation into a single, conceptually powerful science.

It was in this context that the phrase *mystical theology* – originally the title of a fifth-century work of apophatic mysticism, the *De mystica theologia* of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, which delineates the soul's ascent to God as a systematic denial of earthly signs – slowly replaced the earlier *contemplation* and *contemplative theology* as a moniker for the discipline.[2] Unlike *contemplative theology*, a roomy phrase which incorporates an indefinite number of modes of contemplation, *mystical theology* organized the discipline on hierarchic, pseudo-Dionysian principles, focusing fierce attention on union with God as the true goal of the contemplative, now for the first time termed a *mystic*. It was vital to theorize and to experience this *unio mystica* correctly, not least because mystical theology was more likely than earlier contemplative theologies to make esoteric and exceptionalist claims for itself: claims understood as dangerous in rather the sense prophecy was dangerous, constituting a mode of spiritual authority that might challenge

the authority of the Church and its Scriptures. After all, outside the pseudo-Dionysian context, *mystic* originally meant *hidden*, *secret*, *allegorical*. The first unequivocal use of 'mystic' in the modern sense recorded in *OED* is from as late as 1692 (William Penn): 'Taulerus, Thomas a Kempis, and othere Misticks in that Communion'. In Middle English, *mystik* means 'figurative', generally referring to the spiritual sense of Scripture, and has a close connection with the abstract adjective *misti*, 'obscure'. During most of the Middle Ages theologians did not see a distinction between contemplative theology and experience. From Augustine to Eckhart, the 'I' who ascends to God is at once an individual undergoing an experience and a representative of humanity in general, tracing a predestined trajectory away from the world of appearances back to the Creator. In Richard of St Victor's *Book of the Twelve Patriarchs* (*c.* 1160s), for example – a supple allegorical analysis of the psychology of contemplative ascent – theology and phenomenology are mutually constitutive.[3] From Ruusbroec in the late fourteenth century to the Spanish Carmelites and beyond, late medieval and early modern mystical theology, by contrast, proclaimed the harmony of theology and phenomenology in an atmosphere increasingly fraught with fear of doctrinal and ethical error. The mystic's ascent to God took place, not because the mystic represented all humanity, but because she or he was seen as a member of a vulnerable elite, perilously following a spiritual path whose claim to authenticity depended on its conformity to established dogma.

The place of mystical theology even within Catholic theology was always controversial. England's most prominent seventeenth-century mystic, Augustine Baker, for example, was read with suspicion after his death because of supposed echoes in his writing of Quietism, the condemned view that *unio mystica* (mystical union) involves a renunciation so complete that even the desire for God must be surrendered in order to attain him.[4] It is said to have been the Catholic, John Henry Newman, who quipped that mysticism 'begins in mist and ends in schism'. Despite the eirenic efforts of liberal Catholics such as Baron von Hügel (in *The Mystical Element of Religion*, 1908), mysticism's reputation in official Catholic circles grew only more suspect in the twentieth century, as secular psychologists, such as William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and Anglican theologians, such as Evelyn Underhill in *Mysticism* (1911), took mystical theology's model of what was now being called 'spirituality' in new, sometimes decidedly non-Catholic, directions.

Initially developed outside Catholicism by intellectuals of various religious and philosophical backgrounds in Britain, the United States, and Germany, spirituality studies began as a pluralistic reaction against what it understood as mystical theology's over-emphasis on dogma, generalizing the term

mysticism to include non-Christian religious experiences, while often quietly retaining its interest in the evaluation, as well as description, of mystical states. It is through this broad and hard-to-define movement that *mysticism* gained such hold as it has on the modern secular imagination. Between the 1920s and the 1970s – especially in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), which opened many doors for Catholic intellectuals wishing to participate in the movement – spirituality studies held out the promise of a purely experiential, non-doctrinal, universal religiosity, in which an East (represented by the Japanese Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki) and a West (represented by the American Carmelite Thomas Merton) might, despite two world wars, be one. From the apophatic event described by mystical theology, ineffable in principle and practice but still intensively defined and circumscribed by theological and psychological dogma, *unio mystica* came to denote an experience of God utterly outside rational definition: an eschatological figure of a longed-for universal resolution of cultural and credal difference – an Omega Point – in the wordless peace of the transcendent.

Long challenged by some, the idea of a pure experience abstracted from language that undergirded this model of spirituality studies was abandoned as untenable in the 1980s, when the search for an unitary and fundamentally syncretic account of religious experience was replaced by the more local explorations that (outside the area of consciousness studies) now characterize the field, taking a historicist form in the great Classics of Western Spirituality series published since 1977 by Paulist Press. As a contemporary discipline, spirituality studies nonetheless retains its antagonism to the dogmatic and its ambition to track the presence of the transcendent in the world, even if the transcendent has now renounced its claim to any discoverable unity and succumbed to the immanentist and often secular-sounding language of cultural pluralism. Unlike mystical theology, spirituality studies does not now require explicit religious belief. But it still implies it, in as much as it approaches the phenomena that concern it from the viewpoint of belief: an approach that crucially (if sometimes imperceptibly) distinguishes it from other kinds of historical and cultural study.

Mysticism and historicism

How does the study of medieval English contemplative writing fit into this shifting disciplinary landscape? To all intents and purposes, it began awkwardly only in the first half of the twentieth century, after a hiatus extending back three hundred years – all the way to Baker and Serenus Cressy in the seventeenth century – as scholars of disparate background struggled to fit the few well-known Middle English contemplative works

into an intellectually comprehensible framework by doing what scholars of continental Europe were also doing: redescribing medieval contemplative theologians as 'mystics'. Early advantage lay with learned Catholics such as David Knowles who, in *The English Mystics* (1927), had little trouble analysing the thought of the Augustinian Walter Hilton or the apophatic author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* – two writers Baker had also admired – using the prestigious template of mystical theology. At once a church historian and a Benedictine monk – anxious to reassert the Catholicity of the English Middle Ages in the face of the powerful historical narratives generated by four centuries of Protestant and nationalist historians – Knowles was aware that his approach to these writers was a blend of the theological and the historical, and no doubt aware that the theology in question was decidedly non-native to medieval England. However, since Hilton and the *Cloud*-author wrote of an ascent to God in language indebted to Augustine, Bernard, Richard of St Victor, and, in the latter case, Pseudo-Dionysius himself, the historical imprecisions involved seemed worth it, if the prize was the reintegration of English contemplative writing within the mystical mainstream.

Not that it proved easy to integrate very much. Faced with writers such as Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich, whose models of contemplative practice were largely unrelated to those favoured by mystical theology, Catholic scholars floundered. Even the brilliant editor and theological historian Edmund Colledge, writing between the early 1950s and the early 1990s, repeatedly dismisses Rolle's account of union with the blessed in heaven through spiritual song – influential as this was in late-medieval England – as low-grade. Laying an Augustinian theoretical grid across *A Revelation of Love* too coarse to catch anything notable, Paulo Molinari's learned 1958 study, *Julian of Norwich*, demonstrates only the limits of mystical theology as an analytic tool. Most serious, the canon that mystical theology could recognize as 'authentic' English mystical writing remained small: apart from the works of Rolle, Hilton, the *Cloud*-author, Julian, and Margery Kempe, and of a small handful of Latin writers from Edmund of Canterbury in the thirteenth century to Richard Methley, O Carth, in the sixteenth, the only viable candidates for inclusion were a group of meditative effusions like the anonymous *Wooing of Our Lord* and a few continental works (from Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo* to Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples ames*) in Middle English translation. As comparativists have often pointed out – not always with the necessary sensitivity to the historical contingencies involved – mysticism, as defined on the basis of continental texts, had limited relevance to the 'pragmatic and particularist' contemplative traditions of medieval England.

The more pluralistic approaches favoured by spirituality studies from the start encouraged a broader approach to the English contemplative canon. This is clear in the wide-ranging publications of two, early twentieth-century anthologists, Geraldine Hodgson and F. M. Comper – both of them drawing on the huge editorial energies of Carl Horstmann – and the literary historian, Hope Emily Allen, who established the canon of Rolle's writings and identified *The Book of Margery Kempe*, besides doing fundamental work in hunting down versions of *Ancrene Wisse* in all three of its languages.[5] (The initial avoidance of this centrally important text by the majority of religious historians offers a telling example of the blinkering effect of mystical theology as a paradigm for the study of English contemplative writing.) Yet apart from Allen – a remarkable scholar whose public interest in spirituality studies as an academic paradigm was limited to the increasingly explicit feminism of her later work – students of spirituality before the 1970s generally confined their interest in English contemplative writing to the production of further anthologies (often consisting of devout excerpts) and introductory essays, with only timid and occasional ventures into serious analysis.

Paradoxically, it was with the rise of literary scholarship on the 'mystics' in the 1970s and 1980s – mainly through the efforts of Valerie Lagorio and Ritamary Bradley (founders in 1974 of the journal *Mystics Quarterly*) in the United States and of Marion Glasscoe (founder in 1980 of the conference series *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*) in Britain – that spirituality studies came into its own in the field. It did so in a distinctive, half-secularized form which blended paradigms drawn from theology, feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural history, and literary theory and criticism with ecumenical inclusiveness. Initially, the canon recognized by these publications was as restricted as that generated by mystical theology: *Mystics Quarterly* (recently reborn as *Journal of Medieval Religious Culture*) began life as *The Fourteenth-Century English Mystics Newsletter*, its aim the study of five writers. But in this heady academic context, *mysticism* was soon a goal to which any serious English contemplative text should aspire, urged on by scholars, few of whom were theologians and many of whom were not religious, but who as a matter of convention wrote as Christians-in-paraphrase, close-reading contemplative works in the empathetic way they were trained to read Langland, the *Gawain*-Poet, and Chaucer. Indeed, it was not long before all three writers were proposed for inclusion in a rapidly swelling canon of English mystics.[6] These particular proposals, which have not on the whole made much headway, may demonstrate little more than spirituality studies's distrust of categories of exclusion. But as scholars of English devotional manuscripts, headed by Ian Doyle, mapped an increasingly coherent field of contemplative writings by examining how and in what

company such writings actually circulated, such literary proposals also show the field engaged in rethinking its categories and extending its generic and chronological range.

Some of this important work from the 1970s and 1980s is, no doubt, theologically amateurish, lacking the clarity of purpose mystical theology has retained even in its pluralist contemporary forms, even if feminism did give literary scholars an incisive way of articulating their unease with mystical theology's privileging of the spiritual over the corporeal, and, perhaps, the male over the female. Intriguingly, although much of the impetus for this work came from English departments, some of it is also amateurish from a literary perspective, moving silently between analyses of text and of experience without acknowledging the trickiness of this conflation of the rhetorical and the phenomenological: a sure sign of the influence of early spirituality studies – notably Underhill and her circle – on the field. Even now, when the field has developed, for the present, in a determinedly historicist and secular direction – finally joining the mainstream of medieval English literary and historical scholarship, but distancing itself as never before from theological scholarly paradigms – the danger that crypto-spirituality will leak into its thinking remains, thanks, in part, to the energy of this earlier work and the continuing energy of spirituality studies as a whole. Simply put, it is hard to use words like *spirituality* and *mysticism* without succumbing to their transcendent assumptions.

The term *mysticism* is thus an essential reference-point for the field, standing, as it does, not only for an important complex of theological ideas about the centrality of *unio mystica* to the religious life but for the category of the experiential in general, as seen from the more inclusive perspective of spirituality studies: also standing, at its broadest, for the methodological problem offered by the experiential, and for the history of theological scholarship on that problem. But for those who write (whatever their personal religious beliefs) as professional secular historians of medieval English religiosity, the vexed history of the term, its strong conceptual and emotional pull away from the world of history towards the eternal, and its unhelpful lack of purchase so far as medieval England is concerned, has made it come to seem increasingly problematic: to the extent, indeed, that it must be considered of questionable usefulness, at least for the purposes of local historical analysis.

Perhaps strangely, however, this does not mean that the term should or can be discarded altogether. *Mysticism* is still a vigorous term in religious scholarship, as well as in the historical study of continental contemplative writing – as the substantial German scholarship on *mystik* spearheaded by Ursula Peters, and the Anglo-American scholarship generated by the powerful engine of Bernard McGinn's ongoing, multi-volume *History of Western*