Introduction
Contemporary Theoretical Approaches

It is a surprising but significant fact that, while medieval Christian mystics talk about both 'mystical' theology and a 'mystical' sense of scripture, they never talk about 'mysticism' or refer to each other as 'mystics'. The term 'mysticism' is a modern coinage, first used in English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in 1736. As Mark McIntosh comments:

> Today we often use the term 'mysticism' though this is really something of an academic invention; earlier eras referred to the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as 'contemplation'.[1]

The primary concern of this book is something that the writers themselves referred to as 'contemplation' or 'mystical' theology. These terms appear to cover a very diverse set of devotional activities. Take, for example, the following passages from Margery Kempe and Pseudo-Denys, which describe intimate encounters with God. In the first passage Margery fondles Christ's feet in her mind's eye in a rather erotic manner as he addresses her as his lover.

> Therefore must I needs be homely with you and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you desire greatly to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in your bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your most worthy darling, and as your sweet son, for I will be loved as a son should be loved by the mother and will that you love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. And therefore you may boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you will.[2]

Pseudo-Denys, on the other hand, provides a kind of exegesis of Exodus 19:18–19. He tells of how Moses encountered God on Mount Sinai in a dark cloud. Pseudo-Denys states that Moses experiences more than a simple sight of heaven. At a certain point, he envisages Moses breaking free and plunging into the darkness of unknowing:

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[1] M.A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1998), p. 11.

[2] *The Book of Margery Kempe: New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, trans. and ed. L. Staley (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001), p. 66.

> When every purification is complete, he [Moses] hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. … But then he breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.[3]

Why do both these authors refer to their writing as 'contemplation'[4] and is this really the same thing as 'mysticism'? This complicated question is the one that our book seeks to unpack.

While some scholars believe that the notion of 'contemplation' and the idea of 'mysticism' are interchangeable, others, like McIntosh above, are far less convinced. This book sets out to raise questions about the assumed relationship between contemplation and mysticism that we find in much modern scholarly writing. First, there is the difference between accounts of contemplation to consider. Is contemplation one, easily defined, activity? Then there is the question of whether, even if some accounts of contemplation are mysticism, are all of them? The answers to these questions hinge on different ideas about the nature of mysticism. To really understand the problems posed by such questions we need to consider what scholars have meant by this idea of 'mysticism'. We also need to be aware that this term is modern and subject to modern theoretical debate. So long as we do this there is no reason why we cannot legitimately describe either or both writers above as 'mystics' or refer to what they are doing as 'mysticism'. If we are going to call both Margery and Pseudo-Denys mystics, however, we *must* be aware of our reasons for doing so.

Each chapter in this book aims to build a clearer picture of the issues at stake in modern interpretations of 'mysticism'. This introduction sets up the framework for the chapters that follow by outlining the main theoretical approaches to Christian mysticism that we believe are found in contemporary scholarship. We argue that four broad theoretical approaches to Christian mysticism have largely come to dominate the modern interpretation of Christian mysticism in the Latin West.[5] These are **perennialist**[6], **contextualist**, **feminist** and what we will call

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[3] Pseudo-Denys, 'The Mystical Theology', in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibhéid and P. Rorem (London: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 136–7. (See Chapters 2 and 3 for further discussion of this passage.)

[4] The Greek word 'theoria' literally meaning 'seeing' gets translated in the Latin as 'contemplatio' which means 'to view' or 'to contemplate'.

[5] In suggesting this we are aware that a more philosophical reading would break these categories down further. For an introduction to a reading of mysticism from this approach see the *Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy* at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/.

[6] We have chosen this term over the more descriptive 'experientialist' because it is widely recognised in philosophical literature on mysticism. However, the term

'**performative language'** readings.[7] 'Performative language' is used to try to encapsulate a general approach to Christian mysticism for which no adequate terminology currently exists.[8]

Before we consider these four theoretical approaches, it is important to stress that most of the scholars that we will consider in the course of this book will not fit neatly into just one of these categories. If they did it would be easy to answer the question 'What is Christian mysticism?' We would simple choose one of the four possible answers after a brief consideration of their various merits. Christian mysticism and the scholarship that surrounds it is, however, more nuanced that this. As we move through the book we will see that what is truly interesting in terms of the question 'What is Christian mysticism?' is the movement and dialogue between these four categories, and that even scholars who hold formative positions within the development of these categories at times themselves move outside the strictures of their own taxonomy. What will hopefully become apparent is that there are many overlapping methods of approaching Christian mysticism, all of which are, however, informed by these categories, which act as poles around which arguments revolve and in relation to which interesting and nuanced discussions take place. With this in mind we will now turn to the first of the four categories.

Perennialist Readings

William James

Without doubt, the father of the modern study of mysticism is William James. James is not the originator of the word 'mysticism', which as noted in the *OED* was first used in English in 1736. However, James published a series of lectures in 1902 under the title *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.

'experientialist' perhaps better encapsulates the scholars who fall within this category and privilege experience of a certain type.

[7] Postmodern approaches are addressed separately in the final two chapters of the book.

[8] Bernard McGinn splits the different approaches up into 'theological', 'philosophical' and 'psychological'. B. McGinn, 'Theoretical Foundations: The Modern Study of Mysticism', in *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 1 (SCM Press: London, 1992), Appendix pp. 265–343. His survey of the range of different readings of mysticism is extremely useful. The reason for adopting different categories is to focus particularly on the issue of experience and the place that it has been given within medieval accounts of mysticism. For an interesting consideration of the debate about mysticism, also see E. Howells, 'Mysticism and the Mystical: The Current Debate', in *The Way Supplement*, 102 (2001), 15–27.

In one lecture, James focused on what he termed 'mystical states of consciousness' and it was his discussion of these which first popularised the idea that there were other kinds of consciousness to those experienced during normal waking life, which could be referred to as 'mystical'.[9]

James, whose training was in psychology and philosophy, defined religion in highly individualistic, psychological language. For James, what mattered most was personal religion. He had little time for the authoritarian claims of religious communities:

> Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.[10]

Theology (that is, the systematic presentation of an individual's relationship to the divine) and ecclesial organisation (that is, the creation of a Church and clerics) are for James secondary to true religion. Personal experience of the divine is what allows organised religion to exist. In part, James was reacting to rationalist theories of religion; particularly that of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). According to Kant, only the accuracy of knowledge claims that rely on the evidence of the senses can be analysed properly. Religious beliefs and experiences, by contrast, have no distinct sensory content. They refer only to supernatural objects, and, as such, Kant regarded such beliefs as having practical consequences only. This means, strictly speaking, that we cannot *know* that God exists. This is because claims to know God are not based on sensory experience. However, we can act out morally commendable lives *as if* there were a God.

Against this, James postulates the existence of a faculty in human beings that is deeper than the senses – which allows an intuitive grasp of reality beyond that which the evidence of our senses can provide. The highest expression of personal religious experience, its root and centre, are what James calls 'mystical states of consciousness'.[11] James argues that these special states of consciousness are marked by certain similar characteristics that allow them to be grouped together under the umbrella 'mystical'. Two of these characteristics are particularly pronounced and, if present, indicate that an experience *is* mystical. They are: ineffability and noesis. In addition, two less well pronounced characteristics are also often present as an aspect of a mystical experience: transiency and passivity.

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[9] W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh 1901–2* (London: Burns and Oates, 1952), pp. 371–420.

[10] Ibid., p. 31.

[11] Ibid., p. 379.

Ineffability James argues that mystical states of consciousness are characterised by their total difference from states of consciousness that occur as part of our ordinary waking lives. He holds that these make them experiences that defy verbal description because they are not like anything that the experiencer has ever encountered before. Both in reports of states of consciousness brought about through experimentation with anesthesia and in accounts found in religious texts, he finds discussions of experiences that cannot be fully recounted or recalled, although they appear to be recognised in the event that they recur. James argues that these states of consciousness tend to be imageless experiences and that, as such, the recipient is unable to convey them to those who have no knowledge of this type of experience.

When discussing the inadequacy of language to express the mystical encounter, James makes particular reference to the writings of a Christian author, Dionysius the Areopagite, or Pseudo-Denys as he is commonly known. He identifies Pseudo-Denys's use of negative and contradictory language as a trait of mystical texts to use language in a way that indicates that the description of the experience exceeds a single frame of reference, which would limit it in some way. For example, he considers paradox to be used as a means of passing beyond the limits of either the positive or the negative description to what he calls 'a higher kind of affirmation'.[12] By this James means that the Absolute that is experienced in mystical consciousness is experienced as neither a 'this' nor a 'that', but as something that transcends such conceptulisation. James's understanding of negative language has been extremely pervasive within modern Christian scholarship.

Noesis James describes noesis as the belief that this totally other form of consciousness actually offers knowledge of a higher truth value than that which can be obtained during normal conscious experience. Noetic experiences can be viewed as a flash of inspiration in which the recipient is left with the impression that they have encountered knowledge of a highly authoritative nature.

Closely related to noesis is a sense of monism. By this James means a belief that there is an ultimate union or oneness within all things. This is often accompanied by fundamental optimism as recipients are overwhelmed by the belief that they are part of a greater whole.

Transiency The quality of transiency categorises the way in which mystical experiences are often said to be fleeting, like flashes of inspiration that suddenly appear and just as suddenly depart.

Passivity Passivity is the feeling of the will being surrendered and overwhelmed by a superior power. This does not mean that James held that mysticial experiences could not be facilitated by purposeful acts. The examples of passivity James cites include those derived from the use of the breathing practices that are connected

[12] Ibid., p. 321.

with Yoga, and the Buddhist meditative states of *dhyāna* where the mind is focused on one particular point as a means of invoking a mystical state of consciousness. Likewise he sees anaesthesia as a means of bringing about such experiences. James views mystical religious writings as evidence of religious attempts to cultivate what anaesthesia and sudden moments of awareness bring about in a more haphazard fashion.

Given the emphasis that James places on the experience, James holds that any doctrines reported in relation to a mystical state of consciousness do not so much reflect the experience of the mystic as indicate individual preference and pre-existing belief systems, which they have subsequently applied to the experience, that is *after* the event. He considers them to be part of the interpretation rather than the experience itself and, as such, ultimately disposable because not connected with the broader mystical issues which concern him. J.E. Smith comments that for James these were states that exemplified the essence of religion, over which doctrinal claims had subsequently been built.[13]

James discusses the extent to which these mystical states of consciousness should be seen as authoritative. He concludes that although it is possible for a mystic to be mistaken about a mystical experience, in the same way that is possible for a person to be mistaken about an ordinary conscious experience, this is not a reason for the experiencer to doubt the truth value of their experience. Even though he accepts that those who have not themselves experienced a given mystical encounter do not necessarily need to accept the truth value of its noetic message, it seems clear that James himself bestowed great authority on these experiences, viewing them as the core of religion.

James's ideas have been developed and critiqued by those who also hold perennialist approaches to mysticism, that is, who believe that mystical texts are primarily concerned with accounts of experiences that defy everyday language. One very important development of James's approach to mysticism is found in the writings of Rudolf Otto.

Rudolf Otto

In his book *The Idea of the Holy* (subtitled *An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*), Otto, like James, argues that religion cannot be limited to rational understanding in the way that Kant suggests. While Otto accepts the importance of conceptual understandings

[13] J.E. Smith, 'William James's Account of Mysticism; A Critical Appraisal', in S.T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 247–79, at p. 247. For further discussion of James's approach, see, G.T. Alexander, 'Psychological Foundations of William James's Theory of Religious Experience', *Journal of Religion*, 56 (1976), 421–34.

of God, he suggests that these become dangerous if valued to such an extent that they are considered to encapsulate the essence of God. A religion that denies the possibility of non-rational, non-conceptual knowledge of God is, in Otto's opinion, a greatly impoverished one.

For Otto, treatments of religion like these forget that the God they conceptualise as a subject is also beyond subjectification and rational comprehension. Deep knowledge of God requires a comprehension of a different sort; conceptionless knowing that Otto refers to as the 'numenous' (from the Latin '*numen*' – to do with a spiritual place, force or influence). He believes that such knowledge is found in mysticism. Yet while in this sense Otto agrees with James, he is generally critical of James's four-fold interpretative schema of ineffability, noesis, transiency and passivity because he believes that James tries to fit what is non-rational into a rationalist framework. For Otto, this is not being true to the nature of the mystical experience, which he considers to be a 'mental state' that is 'irreducible to any other'.[14] At the same time, he agrees with James that mystics assert that mystical knowledge is ineffable. However, Otto does not believe that this means that we cannot talk about them, it is only that we cannot conceptualise them:

> Yet, although it eludes the conceptual way of understanding, it must be in some way or other within our grasp, else absolutely nothing could be asserted of it. And even Mysticism, speaking of it as … the ineffable, does not really mean to imply that absolutely nothing can be asserted of the object of the religious consciousness; otherwise, Mysticism could exist only in unbroken silence, whereas what has generally been a characteristic of the mystics is their copious eloquence.[15]

The Idea of the Holy, sets out to try to solve this conundrum – how we can talk about mystical experiences. Otto's solution is to suggest that feelings and experiences in our everyday lives already hint to us that non-conceptual knowledge is possible. For Otto, these feelings in some way relate to human appreciations of 'holiness' and as such provide us with a means to talk about them. He identifies three main areas of such appreciation which he calls 'mysterium', 'tremendum' and 'fasciens'.

Mysterium This is a sense of mystery. It is the feeling that there is something 'Wholly Other' that exists beyond our ideas of substance and analyses. It brings

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[14] R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. J.W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 7. Otto says that it is a kind of knowledge that is *sui generis* – that is, of its own type – a phrase which William of St Thierry, the contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux, also used to describe mystical knowing.

[15] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 2. See also, R. Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, trans. B.L. Bracey and R.C. Payne (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1932).

with it a sense of being stupefied and overwhelmed. It is a sense of lack, but at the same time Otto argues that it has a positive aspect as that which almost overflowing itself, that is so great that it cannot be contained within itself. Otto maintains that it is related to and underlies concepts like the 'supernatural' and the 'transcendent' that we find in religion. We come across mysterium then when we come across that which astonishes us within religion.

Tremendum This is a sense of the awfulness of the holy, in that it engenders dread within us. It is that which makes us tremor before it. He relates this to a sense of creatureliness or 'creature-feeling' that mystics sometimes describe. This is not a sense of being created but of being in the presence of that which totally transcends one's self. Otto argues that mystics report this experience when they say that they are brought to an awareness of their own nothingness. They also report it in relation to a sense that their very self becomes unstable, such that they begin to question whether there is such a thing as an independent self at all.

Fasciens This is a sense that there is something fascinating about this kind of knowledge. Even though it engenders a sense of dread and mystery, it is something wonderful, like the feeling of intoxication.

Otto is critical of James for not fully realising these non-rational elements that he feels are apparent in the examples of mystical experience that James provides in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Otto suggests that this is because James is still too empiricist to really understand the human capacity to grasp the numenous that lies deep within human beings, waiting to be awakened in relation to notions of the holy. Otto's emphasis on the holy, however, also betrays his deeply Christian commitments, something which James does not share. Unlike James, Otto is a strong defender of doctrine, organised religion and the Christian religion in particular. His aim is to open up doctrinal religion to a greater awareness of its non-rational dimension, which he already sees it containing, but not fully embracing, holding this in tension with, rather than as an alternative to, the more structured rational aspects of religion. Otto tries to draw us into this middle ground – the tension between ineffability and comprehension – that he sees encapsulated in mystical experiences.

Other Perennialist Readings

A number of other writers have also critiqued aspects of James's account of mysticism while still retaining a broadly perennialist approach. F.C. Happold, for example, argues that the sense of union which these states engender is much more of a defining feature than James's four characteristics of ineffability, noesis, transciency and passivity. Happold in fact considered James's four characteristics

to be rather difficult to separate from one another.[16] Also focusing more on the idea of union, Evelyn Underhill is critical of James's view that drug-induced states should be viewed as the same thing as religious mystical states. She insists that they are fundamentally different and that drug-induced experiences should be excluded from any definition of 'mysticism'.[17] Scholars such as W.T. Stace and R.C. Zaehner have further critiqued James's account of mysticism by questioning the extent to which a mystical experience can be disassociated from so-called normal conscious states.[18]

It should by now be apparent that there is not *one* set position that can be defined as the perennialist, or as it is sometimes known the experientialist, reading of mysticism (the same is true of the other three approaches discussed in this book). Otto's approach stresses experience over consciousness in a way not found in James's approach. Later writers, such as Stace, Happold and Underhill, stress the importance of a feeling of union in a way that is also not found in James. Yet, despite such arguments, what these writers, and a large number of others, have in common is their shared belief that there are certain types of experience which defy everyday language, which can collectively be referred to as mystical.[19] For them, mystical experiences still represent an 'other' mode of consciousness, and

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[16] F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and An Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

[17] E. Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1911).

[18] W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960); W.T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, 1960); and R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957). Zaehner moves closer to a contextualist position. However, contextualists such as Gimello argue that Zaehner does not manage to escape from the perennialist position. See R.M. Gimello, 'Mysticism in Its Contexts', in S.T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 61–88.

[19] Scholars who fall into this category include, C. Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 2nd edn (London: Constable, 1927); E. Colledge (ed.), *The Medieval Mystics of England* (London: John Murray, 1962); M. Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London and New York: Longman, 1993); W. Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, trans. B. Standring (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). Also see P. Dinzelbacher, 'The Beginnings of Mysticism Experienced in Twelfth-Century England', in M. Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: The Exeter Symposium IV: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 111–31; G. Epiney-Burgard and E. Zum Brunn, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, trans. S. Hughes (New York: Paragon, 1989); and arguably N. Pike, *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), although Pike's argument is more subtle than this, arguing for mystical experiences in terms of analogy from sense perception in relation to which he makes connections between his own approach and that offered by Steven T. Katz.

it is this idea that we mean when we talk about perennialist readings in this book. Robert Forman, whose discussions of mysticism are carefully considered in this volume, can arguably be described as extending a perennialist-type position.

The majority of modern scholarly readings of Christian mystics have tended in large part to read accounts of Christian contemplation as descriptions of ineffable mystical experiences. Most of these readings in fact simplify James's reading, approaching mystical texts from a narrower experiential perspective than James himself seems to have advocated. Some of these scholars do pay attention to the language of the texts and the cultural/historical context in which the authors lived and by doing so challenge the confines of this taxonomy. However, for all the attention given to traditions, texts and contexts, scholars within this tradition do not seriously question the very Jamesian idea that a deep and personal experience underlies the essence of the text. This ultimately undermines the importance of studying the texts and contexts, since the study of them, rather than being an end in itself, is undertaken primarily to move the reader closer to the underlying experience. For these scholars then, mysticism *is* mystical experience and it is those who have *experienced* such deep truth who are 'mystics'. Thus, while there are differences of nuance amongst such scholars, which will hopefully become more apparent as we move through the various chapters of this book, there is also enough commonality for us to classify them as one broad school of interpretation. It seems fair to say that this is still the predominant reading of at least male contemplative literature from the Latin West.

However, over the course of the last fifty years, James's general understanding of mystical consciousness has been subjected to a far more rigorous criticism than that offered by the likes of Otto, Stace and Zaehner. These criticisms have made a number of scholars of Christian mysticism radically reassess their understanding of this literature. Three general approaches have emerged, which we will refer to throughout this book as contextualist, feminist, and performative language readings. They owe a great deal to the work of four scholars: Steven T. Katz, Caroline Walker Bynum, Denys Turner and Michael Sells. We will very briefly consider the views of each of these writers, although for the most part both their thinking and that of other scholars who follow but also challenge these theories of mysticism will be allowed to unfold through the various themes explored in this book.

Before turning to these writers it is worth stressing that there are a number of scholars who differ from the perennialist position outlined above, but do not really fit into the categories outlined below. They accept that a pre-linguistic experience of God or immediate contact with God is possible and believe that this is expressed in mystical texts. They do not, however, disregard context in the same way that James does. Bernard McGinn, an extremely important figure in the modern study of mysticism, falls into this category, even though as noted he is better aligned with a revised contextualist category. Thus, writers like McGinn

can be said to straddle the categories discussed in this chapter in a subtle way that highlights the complexity involved in trying to answer the question 'What is Christian mysticism?'[20]

Contextualism

Steven T. Katz

Contextualism largely owes its origins to the thought of Steven T. Katz.[21] Katz has edited four books of articles, in which he and others explore the issue of mystical experience from similar positions.[22] His articles in each of these books are now regarded as seminal within the philosophy of mysticism for the manner in which they challenge James's general understanding of mysticism.

Katz is not satisfied with James's interpretation of mystical texts since he believes that there cannot be experiences that are not mediated through cultural context. This means that not only our interpretation but also the experience itself

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[20] These writers hold an understanding of mysticism, which, although valuing the role of experience, involves a much more questioning approach to experience than that arguably offered by James. They consider context but not from the strictly contextualist position posited by Katz, who rejects the idea of pre-linguistic experience. While it can still be argued that this focus on experience mitigates against a serious consideration of the language of these texts such as we find in performative language readings, the nuanced positions held by writers like Bernard McGinn brings such an assumption into question. Scholars who arguably fit in this category include: L.E. Bouyer, '"Mysticism": An Essay on the History of the Word', in A. Plé et al. (eds), *Mystery and Mysticism: A Symposium* (London: Blackfriars, 1956), pp. 119–37; G. M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 278–321; Baron F. von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2 vols (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1908); W.R. Inge, *Mysticism in Religion* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1947); O. Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991); E. Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowledge and Selfhood* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

[21] This approach is also sometimes known as 'constructivism'; Robert Forman uses this term when he criticises Katz's position. However, Katz does not feel that those who classify his approach as constructivism offer a fair account of it and prefers the terms 'contextualism' and 'contextualist'. For a discussion of his approach as contextualism, see B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 323. Also see J.B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press), pp. 8–12.

[22] The four volumes edited by Katz are: *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978); *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

is shaped by who we are and what we believe. Katz is basically arguing that we cannot escape from ourselves and touch some kind of ineffable or divine Absolute or God.

> There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through and organised by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.[23]

Katz therefore argues that attention must be paid not only to the post-experiential reports of the mystic but also to pre-experiential mediating conditions.

Unlike James, who argues that mystical states of consciousness from any religious tradition can be identified under four characteristics, Katz believes that all human experience, in which he includes so-called 'mystical' experience, is shaped or determined by cultural categories. A Hindu and a Christian do not both have unmediated experiences of *x* which they then describe at a later stage in the familiar language of their respective religious traditions. Rather, the Hindu has a pre-formed, anticipated Hindu experience, and the Christian has a pre-formed, anticipated Christian experience. Furthermore, the conceptual background that the mystic brings to his or her experience excludes in advance what cannot be experienced within that religious tradition. A Hindu, epistemologically speaking, does not have the mediating conditions to report experiences of the Virgin Mary, any more than a Christian can report experiences of Vishnu. Katz notes, however, that a religious tradition's conceptual resources are diverse enough to produce a plurality of experience. In such cases, Katz says, attention must be paid to historical development and shifts in ideology in order to study the effect of such changes on mystical experience. In fact, he argues that there is no such thing as 'perennial philosophy' – by which he means a philosophy that exists across all cultures and contexts.[24] This said, he still argues that there are certain traits that run through all mystical writing. However, these characteristics do not relate to the initial experience, but to the way in which language is used within the texts. He argues that the language that we find within mystical texts performs a variety of functions. He believes that one of the main functions of paradoxical statements, for example, is to prepare the practitioner's mind so that it can enter a new state of consciousness that is not governed by the rules of logic. However, he does not think that Christian mystics use paradox in this way, since he believes that Christian mysticism is always centred on a transcendent reality; although he holds

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[23] S.T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, pp. 27–74, at p. 26.

[24] Objections have been raised to Katz's understanding of perennial philosophy. See, for example, H. Smith, 'Is there a Perennial Philosophy?' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 55:3 (1987), 553–68.

that Christian mystics do sometimes use paradox to try to talk of that which cannot be spoken, as in the case of Meister Eckhart.[25]

Katz's analysis has led some critics to reinvest value in the theology recounted in mystical texts. Taking a similar approach, Ninian Smart, while holding that the experiences encountered by the *Cloud*-Author and Buddhaghosa (a fifth-century Buddhist scholar) may have been similar, stresses the importance of reading any account of such experiences in relation to the doctrinal beliefs held by the writer.[26] Nicholas Watson is likewise deeply critical of the way in which perennialist readings of the Middle English mystics have led to their relationship to other literature of the period being largely overlooked.[27] As with James's perennialist position, there are many scholars who both expand and challenge Katz's contextualist stance.

Bernard McGinn, undoubtedly one of the most famous scholars of mysticism in the twenty-first century, can perhaps also be associated with this category to some extent. McGinn too believes that the context and theological statements made by the mystics cannot be separated from their experiences and should not simply be dismissed as unimportant or incidental.[28] Yet, as we will see over the course of this book, McGinn, following the philosopher Bernard Lonergan, argues for a very nuanced reading of mysticism which also accepts the possibility of pre-linguistic experience of God, or what he terms 'mediated immediacy'.[29] Taking a position that in fact straddles not only the perennialist and contextualist positions, but also contains elements that are resonant of the performative language position discussed below, he is less critical of James.[30] We will further explore the contextualism of

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[25] S.T. Katz, 'Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture', in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, pp. 7–67, at p. 43.

[26] N. Smart 'What would the Buddhaghosa Have Made of The Cloud of Unknowing', in Katz, *Mysticism and Language*, pp. 103–22, esp. p. 121.

[27] For example, see N. Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', in D. Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 539–65, at p. 539. Watson's view is further discussed in Chapter 9, pp. 195–6.

[28] McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. xvi–xvii and 265–343. Also see J.E. Smith, 'In What Sense Can We Speak of Experiencing God?', *Journal of Religion*, 50 (1978), 229–444.

[29] Bernard McGinn, ed. and trans., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (Modern Library Classics; New York: Random House, 2006), pp. xvi–xvii. McGinn adopts the phrase "mediated immediacy" from Bernard Lonergan; see for example, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 77. For a discussion of McGinn's use of this term, see E. Howells, 'Relationality and Difference in the Mysticism of Pierre de Bérulle', *Harvard Theological Review*, 102/2 (2009), 225–43.

[30] Likewise, George Pattison is critical of the trajectory that he sees in Katz and Turner that prioritises language over experience. Instead he argues that both work together, allowing access to that which lies beyond language. In this sense he argues for a slight return to William James's reading of experience, although not one that considers it apart

Katz and others, as well as those, such as McGinn, who somewhat critique this position, in relation to the various aspects of Christian mystical literature examined in this book.

Performative Language Readings

Denys Turner and Michael Sells have independently developed approaches to Christian mystical literature that, even more than contextualism, move away from seeing experience as central to the production of Christian mystical texts. Both focus on the performative element of mystical language, particularly on the negative statements that characterise many accounts of Christian mysticism.

Denys Turner

Denys Turner has written a number of books in which he discusses the notion of mysticism.[31] Rather than considering this idea across a range of faiths like James and Katz, Turner confines his analysis of it to accounts of mysticism by Early Church and medieval writers. His reading of these texts has led Turner to question whether the Christian writings which are commonly viewed as accounts of 'mysticism' should, in fact, be described in this way. He does not consider the main concerns of these texts to be the same as the main concerns that underlie the modern study of mysticism.

Turner views the modern term 'mysticism' as so bound up with the idea of experience that the terms 'mysticism' and 'experience' cannot be separated. He argues that one cannot refer to a text as 'mystical' without it being assumed that one is referring to a text which talks about some kind of experience (ineffable or otherwise). Looking almost exclusively at male Christian contemplative writing, Turner argues that, rather than being concerned with *experiences*, Christian contemplative literature, at least within the Latin West, attempts to tell its readers something about the *nature* of God.[32] Turner identifies what he sees as two strands within medieval mystical literature: one that chiefly makes use of contradictory and

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from context. See G. Pattison, 'What to Say: Reflection on Mysticism after Modernity', in K. Vanhoozer and M. Warner (eds), *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning and Experience* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 191–205.

[31] Turner has, to date, produced three books in which he examines medieval accounts of mysticism: *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995) and *Faith Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). A further work, *The Dark Vision of God: Denys the Carthusian and Contemplative Wisdom* is due to be published by Brepols in the near future.

[32] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, pp. 4–8 and 252–73.

paradoxical statements and the other that engages in erotic dialogue. However, he argues that, regardless of the strategy, the aim is the same. Its objective is, through a clever use of literary devices and word play, to communicate an epistemological message (that is, knowledge about God) rather than an experiential message (that is, an experience of God).

Michael Sells

Michael Sells's approach is similar. He focuses exclusively on the role of negative or apophatic language, or as he calls it 'languages of unsaying'. He too suggests that its purpose is more epistemological than experiential. He argues that in mystical texts negative and positive statements are brought together in such a way that the language is deliberately destabilised. Like Turner, he sees this as an attempt to communicate to the reader something of the *nature* of God, that is, that God cannot be encapsulated in language. However, unlike Turner, Sells's work is interdisciplinary, examining not only Christian but also Neoplatonic, Jewish and Islamic mystical texts. Sells argues that there are texts in many religions that are 'mystical' in this epistemological sense. In fact he argues that there are writers who are not normally classified as 'mystics' but whose texts contain languages of unsaying. Sells argues for a reconfiguration of the taxonomy of mysticism based around this idea of apophasis. Some texts currently viewed as mystical would end up being excluded, others not seen as mystical (because they do not appear to report mystical experiences) would end up being included. Sells's fullest exploration of this idea is found in his *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*.[33]

Although both arguing that an event occurs that allows the reader to somehow grasp that which is beyond language, Turner and Sells differ in that Turner maintains that this brings the reader to a point of silence, as language collapses. Sells, however, critiques this position, asserting that the event is so momentary and language so inexhaustible that the process never ends. The reader quickly slips from the dialectic tension engendered by 'languages of unsaying' to a more binary understanding of God's nature, therefore needing a further negation to return to mystical knowledge. What is important for both writers is that choice of style in the form of literary devices such as paradox is determined by a theology (rather than an experience) that accepts the absolute otherness of the divine and is the outworking of that *belief* in language, the one reinforcing the other.

A few scholars have followed Turner and Sells in rejecting the belief that experience is the essence of medieval contemplative writing. Mark McIntosh, for instance, argues that much modern interpretation of mystical texts results from conditioning, in which the preconception that these works describe experiences

[33] M. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994). Much of Sells's other work focuses particularly on Islam.

is simply accepted. He suggests that when more closely analysed it emerges that medieval Christian mystics, in fact, encouraged their readers to let go of all experiences, even those which seemed most pure.[34] Rebecca Stephens has also applied Turner's and Sells's analyses to her own evaluation of the writings of Marguerite Porete. She, like Sells, argues that Marguerite's text is better understood if not read primarily in terms of mystical experience or for that matter with reference to female bodily spirituality.[35]

A writer who can perhaps also be classified as offering a form of performative language approach is Michael de Certeau. His work pre-dates that of Turner and Sells, but he also concentrates on linguistic representation, linking it with social subjectivity and the reinterpretation of fables. His approach is also closely related to the feminist approaches to mysticism of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray since this leads him to stress the socially disruptive nature of mysticism. The sense in which his account echoes performative language readings lies in its emphasis on semiotics and the stress he places on the relationship between the word 'mystical' and allegorical exegesis of the Bible, an issue that we discuss in Chapter 6. De Certeau's approach has exerted great influence on late twentieth- and twenty-first-century discussions of mysticism. It is therefore with great regret that we have not been able to widely consider his thought in this volume. His important work on mysticism draws heavily on writers like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila whose later developments of mysticism are not explored in this book. To do so lies beyond the scope of this short introduction. His marginalisation is in no way intended as a reflection of his importance in this field. By stressing the contribution of performative language readings and feminist readings we hope to facilitate further consideration of the area in which de Certeau's reading arguably fits, like that of Nancy Caciola, whose work is discussed in Chapter 8. The manner in which she stresses the importance of considering not only the interior value of mysticism, but also its exterior effects, builds on de Certeau's understanding of mysticism.[36] Through such considerations as Caciola's, de Certeau's presence can still be felt in the course of this book.

It is hopefully now clear that both contextualist and performative language reading are responding to the perennialist position, in that both pose criticisms of its rather static emphasis on ineffable experience. We can get some idea how these different interpretations work in practice if we look at the opening prayer from Pseudo-Denys's *Mystical Theology*:

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[34] McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 136–7 and 142.

[35] R.A. Stephens, 'Orthodoxy and Liminality in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham, England, 1999).

[36] M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. M.B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), esp. pp. 94–7. For a clear summary of de Certeau's position, see P. Sheldrake, 'Unending desire: De Certeau's "mystics"', *The Way Supplement*, 102 (2001), 38–48.

Trinity!! Higher than any being,
any divinity, any goodness!
Guide of Christians
in the wisdom of the heaven!
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
they pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the whole unsensed and unseen
they completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty.[37]

We can see that Pseudo-Denys uses a number of interesting literary devices and images in this passage. First, we find the images of light, darkness and height. Secondly, we note that the language is deliberately paradoxical – the meaning is not immediately clear. How can you have a brilliant darkness? How can a silence be hidden?

- For James, Pseudo-Denys is using language to illustrate that mystical consciousness transcends conceptualisation in the sense that it is imageless and ineffable.
- For Katz, Pseudo-Denys is claiming that his experience was ineffable, but no experience can be truly ineffable, so we can ignore this trope. (Although Katz elsewhere argues that Eckhart uses similar language to try to talk about the nature of God who exceeds all language.)
- For Turner and Sells, Pseudo-Denys is bringing positive and negative statements together to show the inadequacy of both as a means of describing God, since it is God's nature, as opposed to our experience of God, that exceeds description.

The relative merits of these readings of Pseudo-Denys are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Here the passage hopefully serves as a useful illustration of the types of reading that one can expect if scholars strictly adhere to these three categories. Although far from entirely divorced from perennialist, contextualist and performative language approaches, feminist readings critique all three approaches in so far as they fail to make room for feminine spiritual self-expression within mysticism.

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[37] Pseudo-Denys, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, p. 135.

Feminist Readings

Feminist readings suggest that the boundaries of perennialist taxonomy, in particular, are too narrow to incorporate the female struggle for self-awareness found in the many accounts of contemplation composed by women. We will consider a number of feminist readings of mysticism, including those of Julie Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Amy Hollywood. However more than any other feminist critique, Caroline Walker Bynum's extensive writings have provided the impetus for a significant renewal of interest in women mystics.[38] Bynum identifies a distinctive form of female mysticism in the later Middle Ages through which she sees women empowering themselves and finding a distinctively feminine spiritual voice.

Caroline Walker Bynum

Caroline Walker Bynum's work is not limited to mystics. However, in seeking to recover the female voice and redress a tendency of history to be an account by men of men's deeds, Bynum turns to a number of mystical texts written by women, approaching them from an openly feminist perspective. She argues that we find a distinctive form of female Christian mysticism and spirituality emerging particularly between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Rather than being concerned, like the male spirituality of the period, with transcending the body, Bynum argues that women's spiritual writings use bodily and homely imagery to move to the spiritual heights that men pursued in a more intellectual fashion. She draws attention to the way that feminine spirituality in this period is characterised by an almost obsessive fascination with food, suffering and fertility, for example. By understanding women's spiritual writing from a feminist perspective, her analysis creates a space for an embodied form of mysticism that is distinctively feminine. Bynum's account of female mysticism is now, without doubt, the predominant reading of Christian female mystical writing within a medieval context. Her approach has been adopted and developed by numerous scholars. The importance of the idea that mysticism is gendered is such that it warrants an entire chapter. The inclusion of a specific chapter on gendered mysticism is also an attempt to redress the balance of our book, which could otherwise be accused

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[38] We discuss this issue in Chapter 7. Bynum's main works are: *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001); *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in the Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

of being a rather male-centric treatment of contemporary theoretical readings of Christian mysticism.

Postmodern Re-readings

In addition to these four readings, another approach to the Christian mystics has also begun to appear in the last two decades – these are postmodern re-readings. Most focus on the writings of Augustine and Pseudo-Denys. These readings cannot easily be incorporated into Chapters 2 and 3 of this book, this despite the fact that some scholars make use of a more postmodern approach to critique the four categories of interpretation outlined above. However, they are too important to ignore. Two parallel chapters (Chapter 11 and 12) therefore explore the postmodern approaches to the mysticism of Pseudo-Denys and Augustine, concentrating on three prominent writers: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-François Lyotard. Authors such as Kevin Hart and Mark Burrows, who draw on both modern and postmodern readings, are briefly referred to in both parts of the book.[39]

Conclusion

These then are the different approaches that we will be considering over the course of this book. Each chapter explores a different theme, motif or idea considered definitive of Christian mysticism. The chapters begin with a brief outline of the theme or motif, focusing on the way it is used in the writings of Christian mystics whose ideas have proved particularly influential. Augustine and Pseudo-Denys therefore figure highly. Once the idea and its importance have been clearly explicated, we turn to a discussion of different theoretical responses to it. Each chapter refers to a range of scholarly treatments of the theme. From these discussions it will be apparent that some scholars legitimately straddle the different approaches to mysticism outlined above. From this it should become clear that modern scholarly discussions of mysticism are often highly nuanced, with a subtly which is sometimes missed. It is, however, important that we take note of this if we are to seriously consider what we mean by Christian mysticism.

Despite our best efforts, in such a short book there will, inevitably, be gaps. Not all scholars who have written on the mystics can be included. Our intention

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[39] See, for example, K. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in M. Kessler and C. Sheppard (eds), *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, Religion and Postmodernism Series (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 188–206. This entire volume, in fact, contains essays that explore the interplay between modern and postmodern readings of mysticism. Also see M.S. Burrows, 'Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics and the Unlanguageable', *Spiritus*, 4 (2004), 173–94.

was not to offer a comprehensive summary of *all* those who have *ever* written on Christian mysticism, but simply to provide an outline of the main contemporary theoretical approaches to Christian mysticism that readers are likely to encounter in the literature and to indicate the parameters of these approaches by showing how they fall within the work of key scholars. As we will discuss in the conclusion to the book, we believe that this approach offers us the best possible chance of gaining insight into the question 'What is mysticism?', and the extent to which an answer to this question is really possible.