THE WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANION TO

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

EDITED BY

Julia A. Lamm

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Julia A. Lamm
For Alan and Aidan
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Quite self-consciously, this book did not begin with any single definition of mysticism or any common rubric. Those authors who had asked me whether there was a common working definition of “Christian mysticism” were relieved to learn there was none. The contributors are scholars from different disciplinary fields, with different specialities, hailing from different academic, religious, and geographical backgrounds, and as editor I did not want to restrict them in any way. They are the experts, and I wanted to see what definitions would emerge, what questions and debates would take form. And these authors have not disappointed. Each has succeeded in walking that difficult line between, on the one hand, introducing their topics to readers new to the study of Christian mysticism (or to a particular aspect of it) and, on the other hand, engaging other specialists and creatively advancing the scholarly conversation.

Christian mysticism is more a story than it is an identifiable, single phenomenon. In order to tell that story, this Companion moves from the particular to the general and back again; it approaches the subject matter from different vantage points; it pursues continuities while noting departures and innovations; and it considers context and personalities as it weighs ideas and images. The decidedly historical approach of this volume – whereby the middle three Parts (II–IV) are devoted to three major eras in Christianity, each of those subdivided according to smaller lines of influences embedded in particular historical, intellectual, spiritual, linguistic, and geographical contexts – is an inherent challenge to an essentialist approach. At the same time, these mystics and mystical trends are not totally disparate or unrelated but instead constitute trajectories and sub-traditions within the larger Christian tradition itself, with recognizable themes, recurring issues, and noticeable affinities. It is the task, therefore, of the two “bookends” of this volume to consider Christian mysticism as a whole, tracing these “Themes in Christian Mysticism” (Part I) and providing “Critical Perspectives on Mysticism” (Part V). By way of introduction, the first chapter, “A Guide to Christian Mysticism,” also takes a wider view of Christian mysticism, beyond a particular time frame or place; it considers the kinds of questions that regularly resurface and discusses four broad characteristics of mystical texts in Christianity.

When I decided to take on this project of editing a volume with over forty authors, many people warned me about the frustrations of such a job. I must say, however, that
my experience has been overwhelmingly positive due to the support and good grace of my publisher, Rebecca Harkin, and the collegiality and professionalism of the authors. I am truly grateful to all of them, both for the pleasure of working with them and for how much they have taught me. I owe a special debt of gratitude to J. Patout Burns and John Peter Kenney, two renowned Augustine scholars, for their willingness to contribute chapters at the eleventh hour, after something else had fallen through.

There are many people who lent advice and help along the way to whom I owe my profound thanks. Bernard McGinn, Patout Burns, and the external readers of the original proposal offered invaluable feedback at early stages of this project, thus helping to shape and fill out the volume; it is a much better volume because they took the time to give detailed critiques. Carole Sargent, Director of Scholarly Publications here at Georgetown University, advised me while drawing up the proposal and then went beyond the call of duty by editing my own contribution; she is a true asset to this scholarly community and a valued colleague. A colleague in my department, Joseph Murphy, was also generous enough to read a draft of my chapter and offer advice as one whose teaching often touches on mysticism. I have had the good fortune of having access to able and energetic research assistants who helped me track down needed material: Maureen Walsh, Jerusha Lamptey, Sara Singha, Rahel Fischbach, and George Archer.

And finally, my eternal thanks go to my husband, Alan C. Mitchell, and our son, Aidan Gratian Lamm Mitchell, the joy of our life. This volume is dedicated to them. Their love, patience, and laughter sustain me.
CHAPTER 1

A Guide to Christian Mysticism

Julia A. Lamm

Christian mysticism is a variegated landscape, and this chapter will provide a Guide. In it, I help orient the reader by highlighting the main roads and some by-ways, some sign posts, and some description of difficult, fascinating, and (some might say) wild terrain that is Christian mysticism. It is written primarily for students and scholars who, in one sense or another, are new to the study of mysticism: for those completely new to the topic, who have never read mystical texts or specifically Christian mystical texts; for those perhaps familiar with one era or text, but who want to explore others; for those familiar with a text from one perspective or discipline, but who may want to delve into it more deeply as a specifically mystical, religious text; and, finally, for those who teach, or want to teach, some aspect of mysticism, but who are unsure about how to field certain questions.

The point of this Guide is not, therefore, so much to determine and define Christian mysticism as it is to provide tools, reference points, and categories so that readers themselves may explore, determine, define, and judge. I begin with some fundamental issues of definition (what is Christian mysticism?) and classification (who are the mystics? what distinguishes a text or experience as mystical?) and then turn, in the last part of the chapter, to discuss just four of what are countless elements of mystical texts in the Christian tradition and the challenges they present for interpreting those texts (what do you look for in a mystical text? how do you interpret it?). This chapter thus begins with more abstract matters and moves increasingly toward the more concrete. To the degree possible, I resist citing other scholarship on mysticism, which would only direct the reader out to other secondary sources; collectively, the other chapters do that work, offering extensive coverage of the state of scholarship in the field. The point of this Guide is to direct readers to the primary texts and, as further aid, to refer them to relevant discussions in the other chapters, so that the full potential of this volume as a true companion might be realized.
What Is Christian Mysticism?

One thing to bear in mind is the inherently elusive and pluriform nature of Christian mysticism. This is true, of course, of any “-ism,” but it is inherently true of mysticism, which defies and resists stagnation, reification, or essentialism. There is not one kind of Christian mysticism, which makes definition so difficult. Nonetheless, definitions are important for orientation, and so that is where we begin.

As several chapters in this volume note, the term “mysticism” (and its cognates in other languages) is a modern construct that scholars have employed in order to identify, explain, and categorize certain perceived ways of being religious or expressing religiosity. Sometimes “mysticism” or “mystic” has been used as a weapon to stigmatize, other times as an accolade. To recognize the term “mysticism” as a construct is not, however, to concede that it is entirely arbitrary. Its roots go back to the more ancient Greek terms “mystery” (mysterion) and “mystical” (mystikos), both of which are found in early Christian texts, although whether they are scriptural is another matter. Still, remembering that “mysticism” is a modern construction does serve to caution that we need to take care in defining and applying the term. For just as what we call “Christian mysticism” has a history, so too does the study of mysticism: each of the many definitions of mysticism proffered since the seventeenth century carries with it particular associations and attitudes born of particular historical contexts, replete with their own polemics and prejudices. Since several of the chapters that follow present the history and problem of definition in detail, I will not rehearse that here. It may be instructive, however, to have some definitions close at hand and to provide a brief outline of that history in order to underscore how attitudes shift and also to help orient readers regarding current debates concerning the study of Christian mysticism.

In the French context, Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) traced la mystique back to the early seventeenth century, arguing that the term emerged precisely with the modern world and its sense of loss of, and nostalgia for, the presence of God. At the same time, it was also used as a way of delegitimizing and thus marginalizing certain religious movements and what came to be known as Quietism. In the Anglo-American context, the designation mysticism was coined in the mid-eighteenth century and was used pejoratively, as a kind of shorthand by Enlightenment figures to identify false religion and thus to dismiss individuals and sects deemed to be fanatical, or simply crazy. Similarly, in the late eighteenth century, German Enlightenment philosophers (most notably Immanuel Kant) used der Mystizismus in a strongly negative sense. With some exceptions, this continued into the nineteenth century, with Protestant scholars often using die Mystik or der Mystizismus polemically as derogatory designations for Catholicism and Pietism.

Usages and attitudes began to shift around the turn of the twentieth century, in large part due to the works of William James (1842–1910) and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). Protestant scholars of religion began to view “mysticism” as a useful, and more positive, tool to define certain “types” of religious experience. Some also saw “mysticism” as a way of getting at something they took to be universal in the human spirit and common to many religions. In Catholic thought, due in part to a reaction within
Catholicism against rationalism, “mysticism” was at once a way to name the movement to reintegrate academic theology and prayer and a way to canonize academically those authorities already canonized as saints.

The study of Christian mysticism underwent another significant shift beginning in the 1980s, when in the fields of history, literature, and theology there was more interest in social history, a push to expand the canon (or challenge the very notion of canon), and increasing emphasis on the local – on particular geographical, historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. This shift both inspired and was inspired by careful textual work, the result being new critical editions and translations of primary texts deemed mystical. New scholarship inspired by feminist critique, literary criticism, deconstruction, and post-modern sensibilities challenged the confessional stances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many mystics came to be appreciated as inhabiting the periphery of Christian thought and spirituality, or even the territories beyond, and have come to be celebrated as being heterodox or heretical. In short, the student of Christian mysticism needs to be aware, at the very least, of his or her own assumptions of what makes a text a *mystical* text, and what attitude or valuation is attached to that.

At present mysticism appears to be enjoying a more positive status than in the past, although it still has its detractors. Rather than being a tool of inter- and intra-denominational polemics within Christianity, it is appealed to as a resource for overcoming such polemics. Similarly, it has also provided a fruitful avenue to pursue interreligious dialogue and has produced a growing sub-field for interdisciplinary studies, as this volume demonstrates. At the popular level, the topic of mysticism seems also to have struck a chord, perhaps because of the well-documented trend away from traditional, institutional religions. Yet it is fair to ask whether the danger now is that it has become too commonplace, almost to the point where “mystical” functions as a substitute for “religious” or “spiritual.” What some would call simply “religion,” “piety,” or “faith” others call “mysticism.”

Arguably the most influential, because most cited, definition in the field at the present time is Bernard McGinn’s. His scholarship on Christian mysticism (a multi-volume work, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, translations and countless articles, and his having trained a generation of scholars at the University of Chicago) has shaped the field enormously. McGinn defines Christian mysticism “a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it” (1998: 26). Understanding some of the choices he has made with this definition – what it excludes as much as what it includes – can help us get a sense, at least, of the status of current debates.

Let us consider just three of McGinn’s decisions. First, *consciousness*. McGinn explains that he chooses “consciousness” over the oft-used “experience” because the latter is too ambiguous and tends to emphasize discrete experiences. While not wanting to eliminate “experience” altogether, McGinn does want to challenge an over-emphasis on separated and paranormal experiences, emphasizing instead sustained processes and bringing to the fore “forms of language” (1991: xviii). He could also be influenced here by the deep suspicion many scholars of religion have about the appeal to experience: they read it as an attempt to seal off a part of oneself from scientific scrutiny. Second, *presence*. Here McGinn explicitly takes his cue from a particular passage by Teresa of
Avila (1515–1582), which he thinks captures what so many Christian mystics are trying to get at. He is also likely trying to correct the tendency of many scholars who are attracted to some Christian mystics’ compelling descriptions of absence, a concept that has deep resonance in a post-modern world. While much mystical language about absence is indeed existentially powerful and poetically stirring, for the Christian mystic the consciousness of divine absence is always related to consciousness of divine presence. Third, transformation. With this, again, McGinn resists previous tendencies to view mysticism as connected to isolated, irrational, or paranormal events. He points instead to a transformative process and sustained way of living that is at once moral, intellectual, and spiritual. In all of this, it is important to remember that McGinn sees his own definition as heuristic description, and he is clear in pointing out that – while certainly informed by larger debates in the fields of religious studies, philosophy, and the social sciences – it has taken particular shape inductively, from his close reading of Christian texts.

Many chapters in this volume explicitly employ McGinn’s definition, thereby demonstrating how capacious and illuminating it can be. Many others, however, offer their own definitions. I glean just some of these from various chapters below in order to underscore the importance, difficulty, and provisional nature of the act of defining something that, almost by its very nature, resists definition. These examples were not necessarily intended to be formal definitions, but could arguably function as such; each arises from the particularities of the assigned topic. This should serve, too, to remind us that the process of defining, especially defining something as huge as Christian mysticism, requires a continual movement between the particular and the more general. Having several working definitions in mind, the reader might then approach the subject matter with some confidence – enough perhaps to refine those definitions. In my own discussion, I intentionally alternate among many definitions and terms – for example, referring to consciousness, experience, encounter, knowledge, etc. – thus highlighting the pluriform nature of our subject matter.

Barbara Newman, in “Gender,” describes mysticism as “a quest for experiential union with God,” which “seeks to transcend all categories of human thought, including sex and gender.” Michael Cusato, in his chapter on the Spiritual Franciscans, writes, “This spiritual understanding was not of an intellectual order (one of superior intelligence) but rather of an intimate, fuller and more immediate experience of God – hence, the connection to mysticism.” Finally, George Demacopolous, reminding us of differences between the Latin western traditions and Greek eastern traditions, explains that the term mysticism refers “to the relevant categories of thought that capture the Byzantine understanding of the mystery or, perhaps more properly, the ‘hidden mystery’ of divine/human communion.” And last, to round out these definitions, I cite that offered by David B. Perrin in his chapter, “Mysticism,” for the Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality: “[T]he radical surrender of self to the loving embrace of the Other who is at the foundation of all life, the One to whom we owe our very existence . . . Thus, to enter into the depth of the human experience known as mysticism is to enter into the story of the passionate love affair between humanity and the divine. This outpouring of love has resulted in the transformation of individuals, society, and the church in many different ways” (443).
Who Are the Mystics?

Most of the mystics discussed in this volume would not have recognized or appreciated this designation for themselves, and some would likely be disconcerted to see with whom modern scholars have grouped them. Furthermore, it is only very recently that certain major religious figures – such as Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), Martin Luther (1483–1546), or John Calvin (1509–1564) – have been, in a qualified way, ranked among Christian mystics; hence, some authors in this volume have had to problematize the issue. This only underscores the fact that attitudes and definitions of mysticism shift with the time. So who are the mystics?

Mystical authors

In studying Christian mysticism, we must rely inevitably, albeit not exclusively, on texts. As Douglas Anderson from the perspective of neuroscience and Ralph Hood and Zhuo Chen from the perspective of the social sciences demonstrate in Part V, the study of human subjects themselves is a necessary part of the modern scientific approach. Even these studies, however, are deeply informed by the reading of texts: self-reports, secondary observations, classical texts, and theoretical formulations. In short, our primary access to Christian mystics, hence to something more abstract called Christian mysticism, is through texts – primarily the mystical texts written or dictated by some Christians known (at least by some) for dedicated lives of prayer, virtue, and service, which drew them into some kind of intense, intimate, and immediate relationship with God, a relationship that in turn became defining for their lives and inspirational for others.

So what is a mystical text? Most hagiographies, prayer manuals, religious autobiographies, devotional writings are not mystical texts – but some are. Teresa of Avila’s Life, for instance, is full of accounts of various paranormal states and occurrences, yet it is her more systematized The Interior Castle, which tends to downplay these things, that has become a recognized classic of Christian mysticism. Sometimes a mystical “text” may constitute only a few passages within a much larger text. So, to offer another example, Augustine of Hippo’s (354–430) autobiographical Confessions is not usually considered a mystical text, although it does contain relatively brief descriptions of two mystical ascents that proved to be hugely influential in the course of Christian mysticism in the west. In such cases, a pertinent question becomes, how do mystical accents affect our interpretation of a work (or a body of work) and our understanding of the author?

Our unavoidable dependence on texts raises several problems. First and foremost is the problem of what we might call religious elitism. Most of the mystical texts discussed in this volume are either established classics in the history of Christian thought and spirituality, or they arguably should be. These texts are not mere jottings of unusual occurrences, but are, rather, sustained discussions of what it is to know and love God in a mystical way and what that means for how the author lives out her or his Christian
life. They are also highly stylized texts that display intellectual, psychological, and literary sophistication and power; this is true even of those texts written (or dictated) by authors claiming to be “unlettered.” Although “stylized” in one sense, many mystical texts are also noteworthy because they were so novel in their day, even though novelty was often viewed with suspicion more than laud, not just by institutional religious authorities but also by the mystics themselves. Mystical authors often shake older conventions and break new ground in their style of writing as well as in their development of ideas, metaphors, and techniques. And yet, at the same time, they can be distinctly expressive of their time and situation.

So it seems that in studying Christian mysticism we are studying an elite minority of Christians: those who had what are assumed to be rare experiences; who had them intensely and often enough to have had something meaningful to say about them; and, finally, who had talent and insight enough to have written them out in a form that would be so valued as to be treasured, copied, handed-down, and protected (or so dangerous as to be rooted out, destroyed or suppressed). In short, more questions arise: If we are indeed dealing here with an elite minority, what can they possibly tell us about the larger religious tradition and its silent majority? Are mystical authors exceptional, in the sense that they are exceptions to the rule or are so superior to average Christians as to be a breed apart?

While mystical authors may indeed represent an extremely small, elite minority (given the rhetorical and authorial genius of these writers), this is not necessarily to say that mystics were rare or unusual in the history of Christianity. Indeed, it can only be assumed that there were (are) more mystics than mystical authors. As possible evidence for this, let me offer several examples from different time periods.

In early Christianity, before the separation of exegetical and theological reflection from the spiritual life, authors of mystical texts that became classics were surrounded by fellow Christians learning how to interpret scripture as a part of their religious formation. At the beginning of the third century, for example, Origen (184/5–253/4) was a renowned spiritual guide and charismatic leader who dared to stay in Alexandria, as leader of the Christian school there, during flare-ups of persecution when the church clergy had fled. There is no reason to doubt that among Origen’s circles of students and spiritual charges, as they read scripture with him using his methods, were several who experienced the kind of transformative and inner appropriation of Scriptural texts that Origen had called for – in other words, some kind of mystical experience.17

Likewise, in the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395), so significant for the early development of Christian mysticism and the apophatic tradition,18 had insisted that his older sister Macrina was both sister and teacher. A generation later, Jerome (c. 347–420) read scripture with Paula and other women who were also versed and learned in exegesis, languages, and doctrine, although they did not leave behind written treatises (at least not that we know of) since, as Peter Brown points out, writing was deemed a male occupation (366–371). There is, furthermore, the paradigmatic event – a mystical ascent and ecstatic experience – in the garden in Ostia shared by both Augustine and his mother, Monica; later, as a bishop, Augustine was determined to lead his congregation, educated and uneducated alike, to “mystical foreshadowings of their heavenly goal.”19
In short, these early mystical authors (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine), towering figures that they were, did not write in isolation but were parts of communities, both larger communities worshiping together and also more intimate circles of Christians wanting to live out the Christian life in a committed, reflective manner. It is also worth noting the active presence of women in some of these circles; although no mystical texts by the pens of women that we know of exist from these early centuries, this does not mean that they, or other Christians now anonymous to us, did not have (or did not desire to have) such experiences.

In the thirteenth century, with the explosion of itinerant preaching and what McGinn has termed “the new mysticism” (1998), an interesting shift occurred that would take even firmer hold in the late medieval, early modern, and then modern periods. As we have seen, in early Christianity mystical authors were often, although not exclusively, recognized religious leaders, and while there were communities around them, the relationship between mystical author and community was still mostly vertical. With growing literacy in the thirteenth century, the growth of towns and the merchant class, and consequently with the development of vernacular theologies, the relation between many mystical authors and their circles became more lateral in nature. This again serves to remind us that these texts were not written in isolation but for a certain readership; even though we may not be able to reconstruct those audiences as fully as we might like, attention to “particular textual culture[s]” (as Denis Renevey puts it) is imperative. Furthermore, this more lateral type of relationship between mystical author and audience or readership suggests a dynamic process of the production, reception, and consumption of mystical texts. This in turn suggests that there were numerous people interested in such mystical experiences. This was certainly the case going into the modern era. The Ignatian and Salesian traditions, for instance, both explicitly addressed the desire of the laity for deepening their practices of prayer and meditation.

The basic fact of the anonymity of so many mystics or would-be mystics ought not be forgotten, even if we cannot escape it. As Paul Gavrilyuk illustrates with the case of the Jesus Prayer in the eastern Orthodox tradition, there have also been communities comprised of countless practitioners of certain mystical prayers and practices that will always remain unknown to us. In the east there was much less a sense than in the Latin west that an individual could stand out as a mystic, with the inner cartography of the soul laid bare for others to examine. In her chapter (34), “Mystics of the Twentieth Century,” Mary Frohlich offers poignant examples of how two mystics might never have been recognized as such. We might not know of the visions of Nicholas Black Elk (1863–1950), who came out of an oral tradition, had a poet not interviewed him and published them; even so, we are left with the difficult interpretive issues of how well that poet understood Black Elk and of what he decided to leave out of the published version. Similarly, we might never have known of the extended mystical reflections of the international diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), had his journal not been found after his death.

In summary, when asking “who are the Christian mystics?” and realizing we are largely restricted to the texts that some of them wrote, we would do well to proceed with caution by recognizing how limited the historical record is and acknowledging
that the texts we do have were products as much as they were causes. In other words, however influential these texts have proven to be, they were themselves inspired by, and responses to, needs and aspirations of their day.

“Everyday” mystics

Another question arises. Even if we acknowledge and agree that mystical authors were parts of communities that either lived or sought to live a life of contemplative prayer and practice that may fairly be considered mystical, that still does not address the question of whether we are talking about an elite minority of Christians. Is mystical experience an eccentric expression of Christian spirituality and piety, or does it capture and express something integral to the Christian life? And if the latter, can only a few exemplify that? In some cases, the mystical authors discussed in this volume do seem to express an extreme, or at the very least ideal, form of Christian life very difficult to imagine for the majority of people having to earn a living, feed a family, and otherwise make their way in the world. There is a reason why the contemplative life was once thought to be possible only in a cloistered community. In other cases, there are mystical authors who were very much on the margins, or even pushed beyond the boundaries, of Christianity.

Scholars of mysticism have debated this issue, and the mystical authors discussed in this volume would also likely disagree on whether mystical experience of God is or should be the goal for every Christian or just for the few – or, for that matter, whether it should be a goal at all in this life. It is an important question, the answer to which will reveal much about one’s understanding of mysticism and attitude towards it. It might be helpful to begin with a succinct discussion of the matter by Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904–1984), twentieth-century theologian. His own answer is quite clear: there are everyday mystics. Yet how he frames the issue is helpful, for in a matter of two pages he captures the tensions inherent in the issue.

In a piece entitled “Everyday Mysticism,” Rahner rejected the notion of mystical experience “as a single and rare exceptional case in individual human beings and Christians which is granted to the latter either by psycho-technical effort or by a special grace of God as a rare privilege or by both together, without really having any constitutive importance for the actually way to perfect salvation” (69). Christianity, he insisted, “rejects such an elitist interpretation of life” (69). Rahner instead regarded the “mystical experience of transcendence at least as a paradigmatic elucidation of what happens in faith, hope, and love on the Christian path to the perfection of salvation wherever salvation in the Christian sense is attained” (69). At the same time, Rahner conceded the phenomenon that some seem more advanced at least psychologically, but that theologically it must be granted an “exemplary function” (70).

The difference could rest in how “mystical experience of transcendence” is interpreted, but for many others mystical knowledge or mystical union is considered rare. Let me offer examples of three types of elitist attitudes: institutional, individual exceptionalism, and counter-institutional. A classic example of the first kind is the Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century), who, in addressing his The Mystical Theology to a certain