
⁴⁷ Frank Tobin, p. 138.

metaphysical speculations and will see in religion only a social discipline.” Gods were seen as purely figurative representations of society. The fact that Durkheim and his circle were militantly secular Jews may have had something to do with it. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown called it a “grievous error” to suppose that anyone but a sophisticated outside observer could make sense of ritual activity. Stark: “This, and a great deal of similar ‘expert’ advice, turned social-scientific attention to peripheral matters, giving primacy to what people did in the name of religion, which then appeared to be fundamentally irrational to social scientists who, having dismissed the objects of those activities, could not conceive of why people engaged in such actions.” Since supernatural beings do not exist, it was said to be absurd to interpret religious rituals as efforts to enlist the divine on one’s behalf. Even Clifford Geertz denied that Navajo healing ceremonies were intended to cure people. Rather the rituals provided the ill person with a vocabulary to relate her distress. Never mind that the ceremony consists almost entirely with the chant, “may the patient be well.” Sociologists seems to be saying, “since we know there are no Gods, they can’t be the real object of religion. (June 6, 2003), B7-9.

⁴² Ibid., 178.

⁴³ Anne Clark Bartlett, “Foucault’s ‘Medievalism’”, Mystics Quarterly 20/1 (March 1994): 10.

⁴⁴ For example, Anne Clark Bartlett criticizes Foucault’s nostalgic, elegiac reading of sexuality in the Middle Ages. Contrary to the historical record, medieval sexuality cannot be characterized as free from routine, law, and constriction as Foucault would have us believe. Foucault sets up the Middle Ages as a “ideal construct”, a foil for what he sees as modernity’s repressed, “denatured” attitudes toward sexuality. The proof for Foucault can be found in the tradition of mysticism which was “incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring which leaves us spent: all of these experiences seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.” (Order, 29). Bartlett also notes the absence of women in Foucault’s studies, offering a word of caution for those working on the texts of female mystics from a Foucaultian perspective. “Foucault’s ‘Medievalism’”, Mystics Quarterly 20/1 (March 1994): 15-16.

⁴⁵ I am uneasy with Jeffrey Kripal’s description of his work on the history of twentieth-century scholarship on mysticism. He says he writes “within a radically pluralistic context about a deracinated, essentially ‘floating’ category with often only the most tenuous connections to the historical traditions.” He acknowledges that this disconnect may be either “an opportunity to welcome” or an “unfortunate corruption to mourn and ultimately reject,” but he does not offer any arguments on one side or the other. Jeffrey J. Kripal, Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10, 333 note 26. Kripal states that he reads “mystical texts, first and foremost, as cultural sites of sexual and gender liminality, as semiotic openings to a more polymorphous erotic existence that would be impossible within the more orthodox parameter of the social register in question.” P. 17.

⁴⁶ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., A History of Women: Silences of the Middle Ages. A History of Women in the West Vol. II, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

apologetic, suggesting that more substantial evidence is lacking. Barbara Newman addresses this issue in God and the Goddess: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 36, 48.

³⁰ Antonia Lacey, "Gendered Language and the Mystic Voice: Reading from Luce Irigaray to Catherine of Siena," in New Trends in Feminine Spirituality, 329-42.

³¹ Sarah Coakley, Powers and Submissinos: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 5.

³² John C. Hirsh, "Religious Attitudes and Mystical Language in Medieval Literary Texts: An Essay in Methodology," in Vox Mystica, p. 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴ Rosemary Drage Hale, "'Taste and See, for God is Sweet': Sensory Perception and Memory in Medieval Christian Mystical Experience," in Vox Mystica, p. 3.

³⁵ Jane Chance, "Speaking in Propria Persona: Authorizing the Subject as a Political Act in Late Medieval Feminine Spirituality." Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, vol. 2: New Trends in Feminine Spirituality, p. 272, note 8.

³⁶ See See Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "The In-Carnation of Beatrice of Nazareth's Theology," in Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, vol. 2: New Trends in Feminine Spirituality, p. 76. If it is the case that scholars choose their disciplines and research topics because of some factor in their own personal lives, it is relevant to refer to one's participation in the spiritual life (or not) in assessing academic work on mysticism. One group operates within a community of faith (Christian or otherwise) and the other outside it. Both bring different gifts that can assist or block an accurate interpretation of historical material focused on spirituality and mysticism.

Karma Lochrie calls attention to the ways in which a too exclusive focus on context (which fits more comfortably into academic categories) can minimize the mystical aspects of texts or press them into the service of context in artificial ways. Karma Lochrie, 61, 59.

³⁷ Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray," 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, "'God' between their lips: Desire between women in Irigaray and Eliot", Novel 25 (3): 113-49; and "Bodies and God: Poststructuralist feminists return to the fold of spiritual materialism." boundary 2 19 (2): 113-49.

⁴⁰ Related questions involve how to think of the interpretive task in the light of those scholars who judge Christianity a force to be opposed because it usurps women's power, creativity and bodiliness, and those for whom Christianity has provided and can continue to provide liberation for women. History suggests that organized religion is not only a source of oppression but also a resource for empowering women, providing a space for women to meet, organize and grow into human and spiritual maturity.

⁴¹ Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray," 175. In an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled "Why Gods Should Matter in Social Science," Rodney Stark wonders why social scientists have avoided examining what people believe about Gods for over 100 years. He points to Emile Durkheim's interest in the functional aspects of religion and the centrality of ritual at the expense of the Gods. Durkheim wrote: "Thus the sociologist will pay scant attention to the different ways in which men and peoples have conceived the unknown cause and mysterious depth of things. He will set aside all such

reveal that Margery's triumphs over clergy, however exhilarating, do not amount to a triumph over clerical discourse." David Wallace, "Mystics and Followers in Siena and East Anglia: A Study in Taxonomy, Class, and Cultural Mediation." Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1984, eds. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: Brewer, 1984), 185-86.

²⁰ See Steven Ozment, Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 4-13.

²¹ Mary Suydam, [Essay on beguines/Xeroxed]. 176. Hollywood articulates as an important project for a feminist philosophy of religion the need "to determine how far the immanent can be reinscribed as the site of transcendence without returning to the logic of sacrifice and bodily suffering seemingly endemic to the incarnational theologies of Christianity."

²² Karma Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh, p. 227. A scholar who acknowledges that she finds no typology of "mystic versus the church" in the work of Elisabeth of Schonau is Anne L. Clark, Elisabeth of Schonau: A Twelfth-Century Visionary (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 4.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

²⁴ Good scholarship requires that we avoid reducing complex phenomena to overly narrow categories or ideological types in order to obtain a certain set of analytical results. Such work also requires vigilance as to one's own location, values and biases. Non-white feminist thinkers from first and two-thirds worlds play an important role in inviting western, white feminists to be more self-critical of biases, stereotypes, and the use of theory that does not attend to the real-life suffering of excluded women. See Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok, Pui-lan, eds., Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse (New York: Routledge, 2002); bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," Postmodern Culture, 1/1 (September, 199); and Ellen T. Armour Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁵ Alexandra Barrat, "Undutiful Daughters and Metaphorical Mothers Among the Beguines," in Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, vol. 2: New Trends in Feminine Spirituality, pp. 87, 82-83.

²⁶ Barbara Newman, From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 2.

²⁷ Hollywood, "Justice and Gender," 29.

²⁸ Anonymous proposal submitted for the "Mysticism and Feminism" section of the 2003 meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

²⁹ Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong, "Womanly Men and Many Women in Thomas a Kempis and St. Teresa" in Vox Mystica, p. 107-108. A related issue is the extent to which scholars assign significant importance to terms in Latin and European vernaculars that are gendered masculine, feminine or neuter. How much weight can be born by the gender of words in terms of supporting an author's conscious or even unconscious awareness of gender issues? I am not suggesting that the gender of words has no import, but I do squirm when scholars move from the gender of a word to a major conclusion about the meaning and significance of gender in a text. This practice can appear desperately

adequate in the long run. In his book, Mystical Theology, Mark McIntosh raises similar questions, arguing that mystical theology should have as a primary goal the enrichment of faith.

¹⁴ Phyllis Rackin, "Historical Difference/Sexual Difference," in Privileging Gender in Early Modern England, ed. Jean R. Brink. Volume XXIII of Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1993), 37, note 2.

Rackin continues: "...it seems to me that current discussions of the representations of gender and sexuality in Shakespeare's plays are often distorted because they are shaped by anachronistic conceptions of gender and sexual difference." She wants to "historicize and thus to demystify the assumptions that underlie current discussions of those issues – the beliefs that personal identity depends upon sexual difference and that sexual difference is immutably grounded in the body." 38

¹⁵ Clarissa Atkins, Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and World of Margery Kempe (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 211-16.

¹⁶ Ernst Troeltsch's neat schema of typologies -- church, sect, and mysticism – in which church is linked to the offer of salvation; sect to concern with ethics; and mysticism is seen as an individual endeavor inimical to cult, dogma and tradition. However, the historical record belies this simple schema, since it tells us that both churches and mystics have always been concerned with ethics and mystics are far from being asocial. The typologies do not hold up, suggesting that they are being used in the interest of an agenda other than understanding mysticism. Another example is Grace Jantzen's argument against the use of William James' description of mysticism in Varieties of Mystical Experience (noetic, ineffable, passive) and the misconception that when one employs this understanding of mysticism, one is discussing the experiences of classical Christian mystics. "Feminists, Philosophers and Mystics," 196.

¹⁷ Grace Jantzen, "Feminists, Philosophers and Mystics," 199.

¹⁸ Karma Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 61, 23.

¹⁹ Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism; The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe." Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 34-57; Sheila Delany. "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*." Minnesota Review 5 (1975): 105-15; Reprinted in Sheila Delany. Writing Woman: Woman Writers and Women in Literature: Medieval to Modern. NY: Schocken, 1983. Cited in Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong, "'Understanding by Feeling' in Margery Kempe's *Book*", in Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays (New York: Garland, 1992), 25. Armstrong notes that scholars who are by no means scornful of Kempe's text still have trouble accepting its essential nature. For instance, they are disappointed in the way the text confronts the authority of the Church, finding it and Kempe not as seriously feminist as they would wish. She cites David Wallace, who concludes an excellent essay on Margery's 'quotidian devotion' and her 'extraordinary confluences of religious and worldly motifs' – by observing that although Kempe 'repeatedly confounds clergy's critique of her personal devotional practices,' she does not really succeed in breaking away from the clerks. Although she 'aspired to be self-directing,' she 'requires a clerk to record her dictation and speaks...as a third person 'creature.' These failures to divert the line of authority to the individual, Wallace says,

postmodern commentators who take for granted certain underlying presumptions that may not have been operative at the time of a text they are considering. For example, texts written in Semitic languages have no Platonic sense of body. A human person is “enfleshed” but no formal notion of “body” exists. [REFERENC?]

⁷ Mary Frolich, review of Marie-Florine Bruneau’s Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie de l’Incarnation (1599-1672) and Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717), Journal of the American Academy of Religion 67/4 (December 1999): 877.

⁸ I disagree that talk about the ineffability of mystical language is the exclusive result of the construction of modern epistemology and not reflective of the content of primary mystical texts.

⁹ From Constance Furey’s review of Brad Gregory’s Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). The Journal of Religion 83/4 (October 2003), 638. “If we follow Chakrabarty’s and Gregory’s lead, we will find ourselves revisiting an old debate – not, as previously, to critique the way Christianity shaped our discipline but, rather, to reassess the strengths and fallacies of our modernist commitment to neutrality.” 638.

¹⁰ Denys Turner, “Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason,” in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds. Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

¹¹ Jantzen, “Feminists..” p. 194.

¹² Amy Hollywood, “Justice and Gender in Mysticism,” Christian Spirituality Bulletin 4/2 (Fall, 1996), 28-29.

¹³ Amy M. Hollywood, “Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical,” Hypatia 9/4 (Fall 1994): 158-185; and Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 266, 354 note 91. I offer one example of this generalizing and universalizing tendency. In an article titled, “The Way of the Feminine,” Luce Irigaray writes, “For men, God represents a transcendental that is inaccessible to the senses... a transcendental that exists beyond the corporeal which is present in the here and now to the self, the world and others. Now this mode of apprehending the divine remains somewhat alien to the feminine subject. For women, the divine exists, rather, among us, and not in another world.”¹³ I suggest that this gendered assignment of images of God is simply not adequate because it is not faithful to the complexities of the historical record.

In the introduction to Gender and Religion, Caroline Walker Bynum challenges feminists who want to replace all male imagery with female imagery in order to attain subjectivity, autonomy and freedom for women because this position fails to take account of the polysemic and multivalent nature of symbols. They may function to reflect and shape reality, but also to invert, question, reject and transcend it. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, Paula Richman, eds., Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 1-20. Amy Hollywood discusses this issue in Sensible Ecstasy, 217. One way to shape this methodological question is to imagine a continuum of approaches with an exclusive commitment to reader response theory on one end – the text means *only* what the contemporary reader sees there – and on the other end, an approach that thinks it has clear access to historical meaning, denying any influence of the contemporary scholar’s location and perspective. Neither extreme will prove

¹ Perspectives on the retrieval of ancient and medieval texts vary. One view says that since all ancient texts are lost to us, our readings are necessarily “strong”, i.e., coercive, even when sympathetic. A second view assumes that we are in a position to read all texts as if they were immediately available to us and answerable to our needs. A third position allows for retrieval, but knows that it cannot be done without significant scholarly effort.

² Jeffrey J. Kripal, Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10, 333 note 26. Kripal states that he reads “mystical texts, first and foremost, as cultural sites of sexual and gender liminality, as semiotic openings to a more polymorphous erotic existence that would be impossible within the more orthodox parameter of the social register in question.” P. 17.

³ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Marie-Elisabeth Henneau, “Liege, The Medieval ‘Woman Question’, and the Question of Medieval Women,” in Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, vol. 2: New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liege and Their Impact Eds. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Brepols, 1999), 17. The authors raise a further question about how far the modern emphasis “on somatics and the politics of bodily empowerment” in the lives of medieval women is a response to a distinctively female/feminine spirituality and “how far is it the charting of a clerical construction of these women?” P. 19.

⁴ From Margaret King’s review of Prudence Allen’s The Concept of Woman. Vol. 2 The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 635. “Allen’s embrace of the four realms of intellectual discourse, her presentation of the seamless continuity between ancient and early modern thought, her ability to discard entirely the burdensome notions of ‘patriarchy’ and ‘misogyny’ that condemn thinkers (and actors) who in their historical circumstances could not possibly have thought or acted other than they did, her highlighting of the unique importance of cross-gender dialogue – all these are original and stimulating contributions to the study of women and what has been thought about them.” 635.

⁵ Frank Tobin 132. Marilyn Webster, Women in German (1992, pp. 22-23).

⁶ Contemporary scholars whose questions focus on the body find in the Christian tradition a surprising cache of bodily images. Jesus is a God with a body who sweat blood in the garden before a very physical death; washed the feet of his disciples and had his washed with the tears of a woman in Simon’s house; who healed countless individuals from a range of bodily illnesses; fed crowds with bread and fish, ate at banquets and cooked fish on the beach with his friends. The church and the eucharist are called the body of Christ; relics of bones and hair and body parts abound; churches and feast days carry names like Corpus Christi, Immaculate Conception, Sacred Heart, Assumption and Resurrection (of bodies); ministers are ordained by the laying on of hands; people shake hands at the kiss of peace, etc. etc. What does it mean to approach this material with the concept of the body as cultural medium and text mediated by language? How do we ascertain the meaning of “body” and how do we negotiate our agenda and the body language of medieval Christian mysticism? Neil Douglas-Klotz raises the question of

T. S. Eliot's lines from *Ash Wednesday* -- "Teach us to care and not to care/Teach us to sit still" capture the complexities of those scholarly dispositions required to embrace methodologies that include both faithful commitment to women and a refusal to engage in ideological harangue that neither respects the voice of the "other" nor honors the common search for truth. Our knowledge of medieval women mystics is new and fragmentary, and I do not doubt that we will continue to plumb the meaning, liabilities, and wisdom of these texts.⁴⁶

Future scholarship is likely to embrace even more diverse points of view than we now witness. In the midst of a pluralism that both enriches and threatens to engulf us, medieval mystical texts continue to address questions of God, transcendence and immanence, the spiritual life, faith, virtues, and the meaning of life in its totality. I agree with Frank Tobin, that humanity shows no signs of losing interest in the issues these texts raise, and also no signs that it has them firmly in its grasp.⁴⁷

As we chart this path of working with medieval mystical texts, we do well to mind the scholarly imperative to “honor” these women, to grant them the right to have lived in their specific time and place, and to have thought their own thoughts -- thoughts that are likely to be dramatically different from ours. Of the many audiences to whom we are accountable, one must be the medieval women themselves. Insight about the complexity of our own lives and times provides a clue to the complexity that must be accounted for in the past. To be avoided is scholarship that leans toward arrogant projections, unilateral certitudes, and “presentist” viewpoints that have as their primary goal the defense of one’s own lifestyle and intellectual positions. It would be ironic indeed for feminists to engage in yet another form of oppressive power and privilege -- the very accusations they level at the past.

We need to guard against an oversimplification that inevitably comes with time and distance.⁴⁴ The sparser the evidence, the more tempting it becomes to “project” in less than thoughtful ways. Even if one’s goal is to draw critical philosophical or systematic conclusions from this material -- to bring it forward for the present common good -- this “second moment” must follow a prior moment that involves historical work, and allows the past to be itself before it is used to solve contemporary problems.⁴⁵ This requires that we embrace the scholarly virtues of humility and tentativeness, pay as much attention to a text’s interpretive categories as to our own, and view a certain amount of indeterminacy as a hermeneutical strength rather than weakness. Such dispositions nurture epistemological hospitality and openness to conversation with those historical figures we study and with colleagues who have different opinions about them.

and Irigaray, who, by refusing to acknowledge this power, fail to account adequately for the mystics' subjectivities.⁴¹

Hollywood asks, "Can we follow the dialectical movement between god as all and nothing (or between theism and atheism) found" in mystics like Marguerite Porete, "without sharing in the power of their belief? What are the possibilities and dangers of engendering such belief?"⁴² How do scholars account for the mystic's intention to praise the majesty of God, condemn sin, and urge readers to embrace the spiritual journey toward union with God?

Conclusion

In our work of interpretation and retrieval of medieval mystical texts, our aim should be to borrow intelligently, not steal, from these sources, and we need to be able to articulate the difference. Nothing is gained by replacing scholarship motivated by a defensive piety with one that is ideological or dismissive. My purpose here has not been to shut out some voices and privilege others, but to invite scholars of varying stripes to reflect carefully on how we approach medieval texts. Much fruit is produced when diverse, current theoretical approaches are applied to medieval mystical texts with academic integrity and respect for the sources. I agree with Anne Clark Bartlett that we *all* have our particular versions of the Middle Ages, that is, "varying perspectives, experiences and interests that determine what we find significant in medieval mystical discourse." While these variant constructions may be different and even conflict with one another, they can enrich one another to create a more "interesting, vivid, and richly textured medievalism."⁴³

Skepticism about belief and the existence of, or access to, the transcendent in scholarship on medieval mysticism is fed in part by the dominant presence of feminist literary and psychoanalytic approaches. These approaches focus on the identity of the women who wrote; female agency and authorship; the relationship of women authors to masculine monastic, scholastic or literary traditions; the relationship of one female-authored text to another and to a female literary tradition; the literary form of their visions; and issues of gender.³⁵ The result often consigns themes of faith and transcendence to invisibility.³⁶ Perhaps scholars do not see its relevance for scholarship; or they may simply lack experience in this area. But is not belief in God a central element in medieval mystical texts, written in an era when God's existence was taken for granted and unquestioned. Because this is no longer the case, are medieval women to be presented as examples of a primitive consciousness that has thankfully been outgrown?

Irigaray rejects the transcendent because it is linked with maleness, but she also argues that religion is important as a central "means through which society is constituted and subjectivities grounded." This ambivalence causes Irigaray to deconstruct the very deities she invokes.³⁷ And if subjectivity depends on the divine, as Irigaray states, then does it not demand some kind of belief? How does Irigaray's suggestion that women must "*pass through belief and deconstruct it,*" affect the interpretation of medieval mystical texts by women?³⁸ Kathryn Bond Stockton posits that Irigaray replaces God with the body as the always unattainable and unnameable other toward which language tends.³⁹ It is one thing for Irigaray to do this. It is quite another to suggest that this is what is going on in a medieval mystical text.⁴⁰ Hollywood notes that belief is one source of medieval women's freedom to confront the status quo and she criticizes both Beauvoir

equated with the presumed vacuousness of contemporary women's lives, defined and constrained by patriarchy.

4. The Function of Belief

In a festschrift for Valerie Lagorio, John Hirsh calls Lagorio's conviction that religious attitudes are amenable to academic discourse a key contribution to medieval studies.³² He acknowledges the tension between partisan investigations of religion that are inimical to the canons of modern scholarship, and a pseudo scholarly objectivity that sets its face against any concern for religious attitudes at all. He welcomes the advent of broadened academic horizons that consider questions of religion and faith along with those of gender, race and class. Analyzing the "treatment of behavior and motivation in the face of supernatural religious phenomena in literary and mystical texts," he notes how the realization of a supernatural presence can cause both fictional characters and mystics to reform attitudes and objectives, or to confirm them in a course already chosen.³³ Poet and mystic use imagery in crucial ways to convey meaning less by argument than by wonder.

Rosemary Drage Hale acknowledges that because the experiences mystics narrate are both lodged in personal histories and embedded in history, they cannot but be "other" to us. But she describes her own quest for greater understanding of medieval texts – across what she calls the vast expanse of time amidst the ruins of a post-Cartesian, post-Hegelian, post-Foucauldian, post-modern edifice -- as built upon the conviction that "medieval mystical texts are borne of remembered religious experience, recollections of union with or nearness to God filtered through memory and embodied with an array of associated sensory imagery."³⁴

barriers between them and Christ and between each other – habits of acquiescence, timidity and love of comfort – however socially conditioned these habits were. In this context, the term “sexist” is not only anachronistic but misses the mark as to Teresa’s assessment of the spiritual path for the women of Carmel.²⁹ Antonia Lacey correctly suggests that when you look at the effect of the spiritual journeys of these women, you see not “a negative and powerless victim” but a “self-affirmed, positive and active woman.”³⁰

Feminist interest in agency often leads to discomfort with mystical texts that highlight and laud passivity, silence, and loss of self. Rightly objecting to the cultural assignment of passivity and silence to women in order to curb women’s agency, these scholars nevertheless often end up missing the point. Medieval women write about their mystical encounters as gifts from God – beyond their will and manipulation in any sense of controlling or making them happen. They also attest to the meaning of silence not as part of a male conspiracy, but as a vehicle that prepares a space in which to hear the Word and open oneself to the mysteries of union with the transcendent.

Sarah Coakley takes this a step further, suggesting that “wordless prayer can enable one, paradoxically, to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment together, precisely by creating the ‘space’ in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself.” This insight serves not only a contemporary understanding of a specifically Christian feminism, but can also be a factor in gaining insight into the meaning of medieval mystical texts.³¹ Happily, fresh interest in apophatic categories has shed new light on the meaning of mystical emptiness and self-naughting – insight that is not to be naively

I call a third issue “missing the point.” When Margery Kempe refers to herself as “this creature” I suggest that it means something quite different from internalized misogyny without remainder. In the context of the Christian conviction that the world is the fruit of a loving Creator, to acknowledge that one is a creature not only reflects an appropriate humility but endows the believer with an identity that is at once privileged and blessed – the polar opposite of self-hate.

Commenting on Teresa of Avila’s self-description as sinner and in need of purification, one author described her as suffering from “the misogyny that is at the bottom of her self-doubt, loathing, and worthlessness as a woman.”²⁸ But if we wed relevant contemporary psychological insight with an understanding of the deep structures of Christian anthropology, the resulting interpretation is quite different. For medieval mystics, sin and creaturehood are simply facts of existence, a truthful assessment of the human condition in the light of their perception of God’s goodness and beauty. Next to God, Teresa sees herself as selfish, ungrateful, pusillanimous and in need of purification. To my knowledge, no one celebrates or longs to recover harshly debilitating ascetic practices. But should these mysterious and even repulsive behaviors lead to blanket condemnations of asceticism per se, or deter us from asking probing questions about what it meant to our authors; about how this material might be used to support contemporary efforts to recover and bestow value on the role of the body in the spiritual life; or to explore fresh and life-giving ways to think about and practice asceticism.

And Teresa’s occasional but startling advice to her sisters to be brave like men does not imply a psychological antipathy to her own sex, making her a sexist, as some have written. Instead, she may be encouraging her community to shed dispositions that create

Male-female relationships are also often reduced to stereotypes of women as passive victims and men as misogynist devils. But history tells us that women were not only threatened by male ecclesiastical leaders, they were also protected through the intervention of influential clerics and family members. Commenting on the lens through which Thomas of Cantimpre views Margaret of Ypres, Alexandra Barratt accuses him of “consciously being offensive” and labels him an “anti-feminist at heart” because he cited the proverb, “be quiet woman – if you can.” His admission that divine law required that when *two* women see a vision they must be heard, is described as “an almost casual and unthinking example of anti-feminism.”²⁵

My criticism of these conclusions is not intended to ignore or minimize medieval misogynies, but to suggest that these conclusions are historically naïve and oversimplified. Barbara Newman rightly cautions against underestimating the strength of misogynist taboos and patriarchal strictures, but I agree with her when she laments the “endless iteration” of feminist cliches which soon become a steady beat that can be annoyingly loud and need to be tuned out in order to attend to “the more interesting harmonies and discords around it.”²⁶ Do we deny to medieval women the full-fledged status of historical actors that we demand for ourselves, offering instead another version of the “eternal feminine”? In her critique of Jantzen, Hollywood is right to call attention to the dangers of replacing the procrustean bed of philosophical assumptions with equally problematic assumptions about power and the relationships between medieval men and women.²⁷

3. Missing the Point

a performative function in faith communities and this is part of their meaning. They are not private communications between silent individuals, but contributions to a lively, engaged community who shared similar hungers for transcendent meaning.²¹ Even of a married lay woman in the world, such as Margery Kempe, I wonder on what basis does Karma Lochrie say that she was located “outside the institution of the Church?”²²

And contemporary animosity toward organized religion produces an anti-institutional bias that sees only the subversive elements of medieval texts and rarely notices the larger backdrop that involves location within, and extraordinary support and love of, the institution. In her well-known study, Jesus as Mother, Caroline Walker Bynum faults historical research that views the role of women *simply* “as an oblique attack on dominant values or statuses” because so much more is going on.²³ Mystics did not write to destroy the church qua church. Prophetic speech against abuses in the church (e.g., Hildegard) clearly aimed at reform, but often not of the type that we might envision today.²⁴

2. Reductionism

These examples of projection usually involve some form of reductionism. Women are not only victims of social and ecclesial forms of prejudice or only actors who resisted, spoke, wrote and devised structures that confronted oppression. A clear look at mystical texts reveals a complex set of dispositions and attitudes. Not only do mystics offer profound insight into the nature of God, the human condition, love, and virtue, but they are also embedded in what we now see as prejudicial social structures of racism, sexism, and classism. Neither nostalgic, univocal blessing, nor outright condemnation fulfills the canons of academic inquiry.

6. Finally, how does a post-Freudian world interpret pre-Freudian texts? Phyllis Rackin comments on the tendency of psychoanalytic discourse to dehistoricize, preferring universal paradigms. Representations of gender and sexuality especially are often distorted because shaped by anachronistic conceptions of gender and sexual difference.¹⁴ Clarissa Atkins reminds us that psychological judgments about “normal”, healthy sexuality cannot be blithely applied to medieval Christians, whose values, socialization, and worldview were so unlike our own. Happily, the casual application of terms like “hysteria” to dismiss or trivialize certain behaviors of medieval women is on the wane.¹⁵

II. Specific Issues

1. Projection of Contemporary Agendas Onto the Middle Ages¹⁶

The first issue involves projecting contemporary ideologies onto mysticism -- in Jantzen’s words, “fitting mystics into a procrustean bed.”¹⁷ Ideally, categories of inquiry illumine, rather than foreclose, investigation. But using contemporary understandings of autobiography to interpret Margery Kempe’s fourteenth-century Book eclipses the mystical content of the book, and Margery’s portrayal of God, in favor of an *exclusive* focus on Margery, viewed through a modern, literary lens. It is perfectly legitimate to examine evidence of Margery’s human identity, but not at the expense of her portrait of God or of how she saw God as a player in her identity and development.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Sarah Beckwith and Sheila Delany, viewing Margery Kempe through a feminist/Marxist lens, find her not feminist enough for failing to make a complete break with the clergy. They accuse her of not adequately assessing clerical decadence – that is, on Beckwith and Delany’s terms.¹⁹

Another common projection involves individualistic and anti-institutional stances.²⁰ The centrality of social and ecclesial contexts in medieval texts is often ignored or simply missed because of contemporary privileging of the autonomous individual. Medieval mysticism was not an essentially private, subjective matter. Medieval mystical texts had

raise questions rather than offer definitive solutions, but I do want to underline the importance of attending to historical context as at least *one* necessary step in the interpretation and retrieval of medieval mystical texts.

General Criticism

A sampling of criticism of the ways in which medieval texts are used includes the following.

1. How does one re-conceive a historiography from which women were largely absent without simply creating a past in the image of our own generation, especially given the highly political nature of so many of the topics chosen for research?³ Margaret King is grateful to Prudence Allen for her ability to discard entirely the burdensome notions of “patriarchy” and “misogyny” that anachronistically condemn women of the past.⁴ Commenting on the limitations of reader-response theory, Mechthild of Magdeburg scholar Frank Tobin acknowledges its legitimacy as an approach to literature, but wonders if it is scholarship. He criticizes Marilyn Webster for comparing Mechthild to abused women who seek perfection while overcome by their own sense of unworthiness and suggests that such an interpretation tells us more about the reactions of a marginally prepared reader than about Mechthild.^{5 6}
2. How does one respect the historical subject one is studying? Mary Frolich criticizes Marie-Florine Bruneau for disrespecting the intellectual work of her subjects by dismissing their theological and mystical doctrine as irrelevant to their own experience.⁷ Grace Jantzen faults contemporary philosophers of religion whose presuppositions about mysticism seem to be at odds with those of the mystics they study.⁸ Brad Gregory condemns “presentist” or “reductive” approaches to religious phenomena, pleading with historians to explain phenomena in a way that the historical subjects themselves would understand.⁹ And Denys Turner suggests that a postmodern definition of the divine as ultimate postponement, beyond any definition is unrecognizable in the mirror of medieval apophaticism.¹⁰
3. Does the privileging of the human subject (a contemporary interest) foreclose any discussion of transcendent reality?¹¹
4. Proof-texting. Amy Hollywood notes the failure to read sources carefully and completely, and the penchant to draw conclusions from a very small sampling of texts.¹²
5. She also laments the use of essentialist rather than historical lenses that causes interpreters to miss the complexity of these women’s lives.¹³

The explosion of feminist research on medieval mystical texts invites questions about how to chart a course for fruitful and responsible conversation among voices that are at times harmonious, at times cacophonous. Are there criteria to guide the analysis and retrieval of this material? How do we not distinguish methodologies that take seriously the contexts and meaning structures of the texts (to the extent that this is possible), from those approaches that tend toward projecting contemporary ideological constructs on the past?

Jeffrey Kripal frames the question in his work on the history of twentieth-century scholarship on mysticism. He sees himself as writing “within a radically pluralistic context about a deracinated, essentially ‘floating’ category with often only the most tenuous connections to the historical traditions.” He acknowledges that this disconnect may be either “an opportunity to welcome” or an “unfortunate corruption to mourn and ultimately reject” but he is mysteriously silent about arguments on either side.² Some scholars have addressed this issue, but an assessment of their positions will have to wait for another conversation.

I focus on Christian medieval mystical texts written by women, but one could apply what follows to scholarship on any number of sacred texts and traditions from the past. Due to time constraints, I am going to summarize what I see as six problematic issues, and then address four specific problems in more detail: 1) projection of contemporary agendas onto medieval material; 2) the reductionism that often results; 3) a category I call “missing the point”; 4) the role of belief. I conclude by arguing that openness to a wide range of interpretations of medieval mystical texts requires ongoing, self-critical awareness of criteria by which we can judge how we are doing. My goal is to

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I. Setting the Stage

Introduction

This paper arises out of 25 years of interpreting the texts of medieval Christian women mystics within the academy at all levels, and for a wide variety of faith communities in universities, retreat centers, and local congregations. During this 25 years, interest in mystical texts has broadened from believers and scholars in specific faith traditions to specialists in philology, philosophy, feminist studies, literary studies, psychoanalysis, history, and history of religions.¹ These new voices have enriched the conversation, expanding and deepening interpretation of mystical texts. But in the past several years, I have found myself bothered by aspects of the retrieval of texts by medieval women mystics. I began to think more systematically about what I was reading and about what other scholars were reporting in reviews of books interpreting a range of historical texts. The on-going generativity of this material is obvious -- classic texts bear an excess of meaning. But while a text can always say more than we thought, is it equally the case that we can make it say less?