

MYSTICISM

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Current scholars generally behave as though the medieval traditions of mysticism and philosophy in the Latin West have nothing to do with each other; in large part, this appears to be the result of the common perception that mysticism has as its ultimate goal an ecstatic, selfless union with the divine that intellectual pursuits such as philosophy inhibit rather than support. There are, however, at least two central problems with this assumption.

First, mysticism in the Middle Ages – even just within the Christian tradition¹ – was not a uniform movement with a single goal: it took different forms in different parts of Europe, and those forms changed substantially from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, particularly with the increased emphasis on personal piety and the feminization of religious imagery that emerges in the later centuries.² The belief that mysticism entails the rejection or abandonment of reason in order to merge with the divine, for instance, represents only one strain of the medieval tradition. Although this view is explicitly advocated in the Christian West by such influential figures as Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete, the prevalent identification of the allegorical figure of Wisdom with Christ provides the grounds for equally prominent figures such as Hildegard of

¹ In several respects, mysticism played a more integral role in Arabic and Jewish philosophy than in Christian philosophy from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. For reasons of space, and because the importance mysticism assumes in those philosophical traditions has been more widely acknowledged, this chapter focuses exclusively on Christian mysticism. See, however, Aaron Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); David Blumenthal, “On the Intellect and the Rational Soul,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 15 (1977) 207–11; and M. Idel and B. McGinn (eds.) *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

² For an influential early piece on this trend, see Herbert Grundmann, “Die Frauen und die Literatur im Mittelalter: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung des Schrifttums in der Volkssprache,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 26 (1936) 129–61. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing,” in her *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) esp. pp. 129–46.

Bingen, Richard of St. Victor, and Henry Suso to claim that mystical union with God is actually aided by reason.³

Second, even when not self-consciously engaged in formal intellectual speculation, mystics often engage issues central to medieval philosophical theology, such as the nature of the Trinity, God's attributes, and the possibility of universal salvation.⁴ Rather than dismissing mysticism as irrelevant to the study of medieval philosophy, then, this chapter identifies the two forms of mysticism most prevalent in the Middle Ages from the twelfth to the early fifteenth century – the apophatic and affective traditions – and examines the intersections of those traditions with three topics of medieval philosophical interest: the relative importance of intellect and will, the implications of the Incarnation for attitudes toward the human body and the material world, and the proper relation between contemplation and activity in the good life.⁵

THE NATURE AND PRACTICE OF MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM

Directly contributing to the perception of medieval mysticism as experiential, emotional, individualistic, and anti-intellectual – and, hence, as inherently at odds with the highly rationalistic scholastic philosophical tradition – is general confusion over what mysticism is. Indeed, although mystic traditions appear in every major religion throughout the world, there exists surprisingly little consensus about what constitutes either a mystical experience or mysticism in general; the further question of how best to define it has proved to be a highly contentious issue which now has a loaded history.⁶ This general problem is further complicated for the particular study of medieval mysticism by the fact that the term 'mysticism' itself is used for the first time only in 1736, whereas the English term 'mystick theology' is first attested in 1639, and the Latin phrase *theologica mystica* is not used to refer to what is now understood as mystic theology

³ So, e.g., although Richard of St. Victor held that philosophy separated from theology is "insipid wisdom and unlearned learning," he saw mystic experiences generally as leading to an understanding of the divine that fulfills rather than empties the intellect. See, for instance, his *De Trinitate*.

⁴ Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Love (Book of Showings)*, for instance, addresses all three of these topics.

⁵ There are, of course, also numerous topics of philosophical interest that are also addressed within the mystical tradition but which (in the interests of space) cannot be addressed here, including issues in human identity and moral psychology, the proper analysis of visual perception, and the nature of being.

⁶ See the first chapter of Sarah Beckwith's *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993) for a history of the charged politics involved in modern attempts to define mysticism.

until the sixteenth century.⁷ (The difficulties involved in retroactively applying these labels parallel in many ways those that arise in discussions of whether medieval figures such as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas should be considered philosophers as well as theologians [see Chapter 50].)

In this context, attempting to provide a precise and comprehensive characterization of either mysticism or mystical experiences would be more likely to obscure than to illuminate important points of intersection between medieval mysticism and philosophical theology. Rather than seeking to distinguish exhaustively the true substance of mysticism from its accidents,⁸ then, this chapter will adopt a working definition of mysticism in the twelfth through fifteenth century as having as its goal direct and immediate union of the human soul with the divine. As we will see, this attempt to “forge an unmediated relationship with God”⁹ can be understood and worked toward in a variety of different ways; still, common to all these attempts seems to be the assumption of a living God and the belief that the ultimate fulfillment of human nature involves a direct relationship with that God that goes beyond the realm of normal earthly experience and yet is possible to achieve in this life.¹⁰

Given this general description of medieval mysticism, it is both possible and useful to distinguish between two subcategories within it – namely, the apophatic tradition (which holds that the ultimate stage of human existence is a selfless and unknowing merging with the infinite) and the affective tradition (which focuses on the way in which mystical union can be experienced and expressed in emotional, physical, and sensory terms). The apophatic mystic tradition stresses that the pinnacle of intellection is the paradoxical recognition that reason and knowledge must be abandoned in order to achieve unity with the divine.¹¹ Apophatic mysticism thus characterizes the ultimate goal of humanity

⁷ For discussion of this usage, see the *Oxford English Dictionary*; also Nicholas Watson, “Middle English Mystics,” in D. Wallace (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 539–65; and Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique: XVI–XVII siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) and *Heterologies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

⁸ Evelyn Underhill poses the question in these terms on the first page of *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (New York: Dutton, 1920).

⁹ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, p. 19.

¹⁰ In adopting this working definition I follow a wide range of contemporary scholars, including Sarah Beckwith, Caroline Walker Bynum, Michel de Certeau, and Barbara Newman. In “Middle English Mystics,” however, Nicholas Watson argues that Richard Rolle – one of the canonical Middle English mystics – “is working with an inherited doctrine of blessedness too conservative to contain a theory of union at all” (p. 549).

¹¹ Although the apophatic tradition was a minority view in its own time, it is today generally perceived as representative of medieval Christian mysticism as whole. The explanation for this appears to be related to the early twentieth-century battles over the definition of mysticism: in fighting to distinguish ‘genuine’ mystical experiences from their counterfeit rivals, figures such as Evelyn Underhill, William James, and Rufus Jones advocated a true understanding of mysticism

as anti-experiential: the annihilation of self entails the annihilation of sensory experience, and so this tradition discounts the visions of light, smells of incense, tastes of honey, and so on, that were central experiences in the lives of many medieval mystics.¹² To the extent these experiences regularly occur on the path to true union with God, they function in the apophatic tradition not as divine signs but as potential distractions from the achievement of self-abnegation, which involves the total absence of both sensory and intellectual experiences. Indeed, in his late fourteenth-century *The Scale of Perfection*, Walter Hilton explicitly warns against accepting altered physical sensations as signs of true mystic union, whether “in sounding of the ear, or savoring in the mouth, or smelling at the nose, or else [the sensation of] any perceptible heat as if it were fire, glowing and warming the breast” (I.10).

In contrast, the affective mystic tradition often expresses the experience of union with God in terms of a wide variety of emotional and sensory states, and it recognizes those states as valuable unitive experiences.¹³ In this tradition, the ultimate goal of mystic union with the divine is best understood not as a selfless merging into the unknowable divine, but rather as the complete realization of the individual creature in full relation to the Creator – which is seen as including the fulfillment of the bodily senses and the emotions as well as the fulfillment of the rational soul. The general flavor of affective mysticism is perhaps best illustrated by the vision of the thirteenth-century French nun, Marguerite of Oingt, in which she began as a withered tree that revived and flowered when watered by the river of Christ – at which point she saw the names of the five senses written on her now-flourishing branches (*Œuvres*, p. 147). True union with Christ, on this view, does not remove us from our senses or transcend physical reality in a way that renders it irrelevant; rather, it brings those senses and that physical reality into their fullest form. The goal of mystic union in the affective tradition, in other words, embraces rather than eschews embodiment.

Before turning to a closer examination of how central issues within the apophatic and affective mystic traditions intersect with medieval philosophical theology, it is important to note that the majority of extant mystical literature comes not from medieval university culture, but from convents (a term that

as transcending sensory experience entirely in a movement toward the universal and absolute. As later scholars of mysticism such as W. T. Stace and R. C. Zaehner adopted and disseminated this understanding, affective/sensory mysticism disappeared from view – and from the study of medieval mysticism.

¹² See, e.g., Denys Turner’s *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹³ In *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, Karma Lochrie identifies the two main features of affective spirituality as “its corporeality and the imitation of Christ’s suffering humanity” (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) p. 14.

properly applies to both monasteries and nunneries) and – in the later Middle Ages – from the religious “Third Order” of the beguines and tertiaries.¹⁴ Moreover, because the majority of medieval Christian mystics were relatively uneducated members of religious orders and lay communities (particularly in the thirteenth through fifteenth century), both mystical experiences themselves and their interpretations were often expressed and recorded in the vernacular of the region, rather than in scholarly Latin. The words of mystics who were not themselves literate survive only through the written records of more educated people – often their hagiographers, who were frequently concerned more with presenting a certain image of their subject than reporting the mystic’s own words.¹⁵ This poses an obvious difficulty for the study of mysticism, insofar as it is challenging in these cases to reconstruct fully the actual nature of the mystic’s experiences.¹⁶ Even a focus trained exclusively on mystics who wrote down their own experiences does not guarantee a direct glimpse into their inner life, for the ways in which those mystics express their visions – and, perhaps, even the very ways in which they experienced them – were importantly shaped by then current conceptions of sanctity.¹⁷ Although these facts help account for the relative neglect of medieval mysticism by contemporary scholars of medieval philosophy, however, and although they should be kept firmly in mind when approaching the relevant texts, certain themes emerge clearly enough throughout the Christian mystic literature of the twelfth through fifteenth century to make them well worth philosophical attention.

¹⁴ The dramatic rise of the beguine/tertiary movement in the later Middle Ages has long perplexed scholars. In short, in the thirteenth century, an increasing number of women began to function as lay members of religious orders, removing themselves from normal social life and devoting themselves to prayer and religious service, but without taking vows. Often identified as a “women’s religious movement,” the beguines were extremely influential on forms of religious expression and piety through the later Middle Ages. See, for instance, Herbert Grundmann’s classic discussion in *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women’s Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995 [orig. publ. in German, 1935]); for a treatment of the relation between the beguine movement and the apophatic mystic tradition, see Bernard McGinn’s *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadwijch of Brabant, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite of Porete* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

¹⁵ The case of Beatrice of Nazareth’s vernacular treatise and the markedly different *Vita* composed by her hagiographer offers an interesting illustration of this point. See Amy Hollywood, “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer,” in C. Mooney (ed.) *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 78–98.

¹⁶ See Chiara Frugoni’s “Female Mystics, Visions, and Iconography,” in D. Bornstein and R. Rusconi (eds.) *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 130–64.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Benedicta Ward’s *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, rev. edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987). The pressing concern to avoid being condemned as a heretic further affects how mystics were likely to report their experiences.

INTELLECT AND WILL IN THE APOPHATIC TRADITION

The apophatic mystic tradition reaches into the Middle Ages from Plotinus through pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and John Scottus Eriugena; it is often seen as culminating in the late thirteenth century with the work of the Dominican Meister Eckhart and continuing into the early Renaissance with Nicholas of Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*. The final goal of apophatic mysticism – the final goal of humanity – is complete union with the divine, where that union entails the absolute absence of self-consciousness and knowledge. As we will see, a prominent theme running throughout this tradition involves the respective roles of intellect and will in attaining this end.

“What is the last end?” asks Eckhart. “It is the hidden darkness of the eternal divinity, and it is unknown, and it was never known, and it will never be known. God remains there within himself, unknown.”¹⁸ Eckhart (echoed later by John Tauler and Nicholas of Cusa) contends that the belief that one has achieved any sort of divine knowledge or understanding is itself an indication that one has further to go on the path to genuine union with God. Although the apophatic tradition holds that the final stage of the mystic life involves the abandonment of reason, though, it does not uniformly distance itself from either the intellect or the life of the mind. Earlier figures in this tradition in particular present intellectual learning as a necessary stage along the way toward selfless union, and Eckhart also gives the intellect a central role in his account. According to pseudo-Dionysius, for instance, who is strongly influenced by Plotinus, intellectual study is required to lead us from the sensible world to the knowledge of abstract theological truths; indeed, intellective activity can lead us all the way up to the final stage of mystic truth, at which point we must relinquish reason in order to lose ourselves in God's unknowable Being.¹⁹ This method of reaching the ultimate goal of apophatic union is retained in Eckhart, who in fact characterizes God – the absolute principle or absolute cause – not as pure being, but as pure intellect. On this view, intellect is itself unknowable and without being, whereas being (*esse*) presupposes intellect as the cause of its being.²⁰ Properly speaking, the soul's union with God is not a merging of self with eternal Being – it is actually the loss of being itself and the absorption of individual consciousness into the “hidden darkness” of God's intellect.

¹⁸ As quoted in Bernard McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, p. 142 (vol. IV of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 2005)).

¹⁹ See, e.g., pseudo-Dionysius's *On the Divine Names*. Underhill provides a classic summary of this process in *The Essentials of Mysticism*, pp. 11–24. See also Seely J. Beggiani's “Theology at the Service of Mysticism: Method in Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 201–23.

²⁰ See Eckhart's *Utrum in deo sit idem esse et intelligere*.

Although central for the Neoplatonist mystics and Eckhart, the role of intellect is sharply downplayed in other figures in the apophatic mystic tradition, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; instead, the will comes to assume an increasingly important role in the ultimate act of union. (This is analogous to debates over intellectualism and voluntarism occurring at this period in the universities [see Chapter 30].) Marguerite Porete, for instance, who was burnt at the stake as a heretic in 1310 for refusing to recant her views, argues in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* that human beings should desire only God, to the point of abnegating personal desire altogether and surrendering their individual wills to God's uniform, unchanging will. Indeed, Porete is closely associated with the Free Spirit antinomianist movement, which held that those who attained mystic union transcended the authority of the church and had no further need for its sacraments or rules.²¹ Again, a crucial component of what is renounced is knowledge or understanding; ultimately, Porete indicates, a simple act of will (namely, love) is all that remains. The final goal of humanity is the annihilation of the conscious, knowing self: "The whole is one to her without a explanation (*propter quid*), and she is nothing in such a one. Then nothing more remains for her to do concerning God than remains for God to do concerning her. Why? Because he is and she is not" (ch. 135). By letting go of reason (and the need for understanding or explanation), one is in a position to surrender the human will completely to God's will; in this way, the human being can become fully one with God.

Similar sentiments are also echoed in later fourteenth-century English works, such as the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, which states simply: "Love, but not knowing, may reach to God in this life" (ch. 8). Although this treatise follows the general pattern in the apophatic tradition of providing a systematized approach to achieving true union with the divine, there is no longer any sense that formal intellectual training is a necessary part of this process; central emphasis is placed, instead, on the proper orientation of the will – which is not seen as requiring the intellectual ability to abstract to theological truths from sensible reality. Indeed, the Latin text of the *Cloud of Unknowing* draws a sharp distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia*, contrasting worldly or scientific knowledge with genuine Christian wisdom – a contrast that is also found in other late medieval apophatic works, such as Nicholas of Cusa's fifteenth-century *Idiota de sapientia* (which is heavily indebted to Henry Suso's *Horologium sapientiae*). To achieve wisdom, the

²¹ For a discussion of Porete in relation to the Free Spirit movement – and an argument that there was no such movement in a formal sense – see Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

layperson does not require access to either formal university education or its methodology; indeed, insofar as the practice of *scientia* self-consciously involves the intellect's attempt to apprehend the truth, it is seen as potentially interfering with the soul's ability to know God in the only relevant sense – namely, through love, a pure act of the will. In addition, as is typical in the apophatic tradition, language is seen in the *Cloud* not as revealing God's nature to us but rather as obscuring the unspeakable truth of God's ultimate being (see Chapter 54). In short, "God may well be loved but not thought."

The increasing emphasis on the role of will over that of the intellect in later apophatic mysticism is further highlighted in the story of the Augustinian nun Clare of Montefalco, who, toward the end of the thirteenth century, found that she "lacked her usual light of revelations and peace of soul"²² during the eleven years that she spent in intellectual study and in religious and political conversation with cardinals and bishops. According to Clare's *Vita*, when she eventually renounced her desire for knowledge and focused her will entirely on God, surrendering herself to his will for her, she began to experience visions again and became content. In general, although mystics in the apophatic tradition tend to describe the merging of one's soul with God as the end goal of a progression through a number of carefully delineated stages, there is a gradual shift away from characterizing this progress as requiring any sort of formal intellectual training. Rather, the path to the total loss of self in God is left open to anyone willing to pursue it.

Significantly, the increased centrality of the will in apophatic mysticism and the growing sentiment that one need not be learned (or even formally literate) to achieve union with the unknowable divine parallels the well-documented shift from the early twelfth century to the late fourteenth century in general attitudes towards the relation of knowledge and piety.²³ Due in part, no doubt, to the development of the university system and the corresponding transfer of formal intellectual training from convents to the universities (see Chapters 4–5), together with the marked distinction of power and religious authority between clergy and laity after the Gregorian reform of the late eleventh century (see Chapter 39), the later Middle Ages witnessed a sharply increased focus on personal piety – a piety that was not only accessible to those both within

²² Pietro Tommaso de Töth, *Storia di S. Chiara da Montefalco secondo un antico documento dell'anno 1308* (Siena: tip. pont. S. Bernardino, 1908) pp. 26–7.

²³ For detailed discussions of this shift, see, e.g., McGinn's *The Flowering of Mysticism*, Grundmann's *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* and the essays in Caroline Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), particularly "The Female Body and Religious Practice."

and without academic centers and positions of ecclesiastical authority, but that often placed positive value on emotional and sensory responses to God. As we will see, this general shift has important consequences for affective as well as apophatic mysticism.

THE INCARNATION AND THE HUMAN BODY IN AFFECTIVE MYSTICISM

Although the apophatic tradition of mysticism has remained, however faintly, on the philosophical radar since the Middle Ages, the medieval affective tradition has been almost entirely ignored. One reason for this neglect is that emotional or sensory mystic experiences have often been flatly dismissed by modern scholars as overly concerned with material reality and irrelevant to the spiritual transcendence of 'genuine' mysticism.²⁴ The increased concern in the later medieval period with such experiences, together with the rise of affective piety and the feminization of religious imagery has, in turn, been attributed (in many cases, negatively) to the increased influence of women on late medieval ideas of spirituality.²⁵ Indeed, the prevailing medieval conception of women as less rational, more emotional, and more closely associated with matter and physicality than men makes it unsurprising that women dominate the affective mystic tradition and that the male mystics associated with it – including Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Richard Rolle, and Henry Suso – are often described as feminine in their theological sensibilities.

Although its association with the 'lower,' 'feminine' realm of matter has contributed to the neglect of the affective mystic tradition, from a philosophical standpoint much of its interest stems precisely from the light this association sheds on the complex ways in which conceptions of matter and the body functioned in the Middle Ages (see Chapters 46 and 21). Affective mysticism's emphasis on the importance of physical and emotional as well as intellectual and volitional union with God, for instance, actively undermines a strongly dualist conception of human nature that identifies the self with the rational soul; in fact, by focusing on the incarnate Christ – whose bleeding, broken body plays

²⁴ So, for example, Evelyn Underhill describes episodes of ecstatic union and physical sensations as "frequently pathological, and . . . often found along with other abnormal conditions in emotional visionaries whose revelations have no ultimate characteristics" (*Essentials of Mysticism*, p. 23).

²⁵ In *The Religious Orders in England*, for instance, David Knowles describes the "pure spirituality" of the early Middle Ages as "contaminated" by "a more emotional and idiosyncratic form of devotion . . . deriving partly from the influence of some of the women saints of the fourteenth century" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948–9) II: 222–3. See also Simone de Beauvoir's extremely dismissive discussion of the female mystic in *The Second Sex*.

an extremely important role in later medieval mysticism – the affective mystic tradition links matter and the physical body directly to the divine.²⁶

The increase in importance of affective spirituality from the early thirteenth century onward can be understood, in part, as a reaction to Cathar dualism. In the twelfth century, the Cathars (also known as Albigensians) preached an influential (and heretical) version of absolute dualism in the tradition of Gnosticism and Manicheanism that saw the material world as a prison, created by an evil spirit eternally opposed to an equally powerful good spirit. A human being's primary spiritual duty on this view was to liberate the soul from this physical prison through a process of purification that included the total rejection of material goods and power. According to the Cathars, Jesus was a pure spirit, not a physical human being, who came to the material world in order to teach the path to spiritual transcendence; individual human beings exemplified the cosmic struggle between good and evil in their own ongoing battle between spirit and flesh.

The affective tradition countered the perception that materiality was inherently negative by placing a heavy emphasis (often seen as beginning with Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*) on the Incarnation: if the supremely good God could take on flesh, then flesh itself could not be evil. In *De sacramentis christianae fidei*, for instance, the twelfth-century Augustinian mystic Hugh of St. Victor first affirms Christ's humanity and then gives an analogy where the union of Christ's divine and human natures in one person is compared to the union of human soul with body in one person. He concludes his description of human nature on a decidedly holistic note: "I say truly (*bene*) that the soul and the flesh is a human being . . . and again I say truly that the soul and the flesh is one person" (ed. Migne, 176: 405A). Such stress on Christ's physical humanity – a stress that continues to gain popularity and importance in the affective mystical tradition throughout the later Middle Ages – and the moral explicitly drawn from it for the case of human beings undermines a Platonic and Neoplatonic identification of self with soul and parallels more closely an Aristotelian hylomorphic conception of the human being as a unified composite of body and soul (see Chapters 21 and 34).

Within affective mysticism, the Incarnation is also seen as divinizing the material realm; the fact that Christ became human was seen as a "guarantee that

²⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum has done more to illuminate these issues than any other single scholar, particularly with respect to the relation of affective spirituality to physicality and women. See, e.g., her *Jesus as Mother, Fragmentation and Redemption*, and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), as well as her most recent *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

what we are is inextricably joined with divinity.”²⁷ The remarkable increase in Eucharistic piety from the thirteenth century onwards and the central importance of the Eucharist in the mystic experiences of many figures within this tradition, for instance, underscores the popularity of the belief that human beings are most closely joined with Christ’s divinity through his corporeity. It was not an uncommon event for figures in the affective mystic tradition such as Mary of Oignies, Margaret of Ypres, Christina Mirabilis of St. Trond, or Ida of Louvain to see flesh or taste honey in the Eucharistic wafer, for instance, or to see the priest hold up an infant in place of the host at the moment of transubstantiation.²⁸

In general, affective mystic experiences encompass a wide variety of physical and emotional states, including visions and auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensations. In the *Form of Perfect Living*, for instance, Richard Rolle describes the third and final “degree” of the spiritual life in terms of intensely pleasant heat: “He or she that is in this degree may as well feel the fire of love burning in their soul, as you may feel your finger burn if you put it in the fire. But that fire, if it be hot, is so delightful and wonderful that I cannot tell it” (ch. 8). Although in many cases it is difficult to determine from surviving texts whether mystics are speaking of their experiences in literal or metaphorical terms, and although treating the experiences of mystics in different regions and different centuries together obscures important and interesting differences between them, the persistently physical expression of affective mystic spirituality is striking. Thus, Beatrice of Nazareth laughed uncontrollably when experiencing the joy of Christ, Catherine of Siena endured a ‘mystic death,’ and a number of mystics – including Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena – received the stigmata. Standardly negative medieval attitudes towards matter and the body persist in this tradition as well, but Christ’s incarnation and passion consistently provide these mystics with a means for a positive conceptualization (and experience) of the human body and the material world.

The senses and sensory perception are portrayed in the affective tradition as not merely a distraction from contemplation but also as an important means of achieving union with God. Hugh of St. Victor, for instance, describes the senses as a bridge or pathway between the material and the divine: “The body ascends by means of sense, the spirit descends by sensuality” (*De unione corporis et spiritus*, ed. Migne, *Patr. Lat.* 177: 285A). In direct contrast to the apophatic

²⁷ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 130.

²⁸ See Bynum’s discussion of mystic experiences involving the body of Christ in “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century” and “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption* as well as the extended discussion in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

understanding of mystic union, then, which involves a radical loss of self, the affective mystic understanding of union with God can be seen as a radical fulfillment of the embodied self.

Even accepted negative associations with matter and physicality are sometimes used by medieval mystics towards a positive end: female mystics in particular often highlight their closer association with matter and their status as the ‘weaker vessel’ to validate their religious authority. We can see an early use of this “power made perfect in weakness” approach in Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess of remarkable influence and longevity.²⁹ Active on a wide variety of fronts, including theology, philosophy, poetry, music, and medicine, Hildegard never expresses the anxiety of Clare of Montefalco concerning the compatibility of intellectual activity with her mystical visions. Still, Hildegard emphasizes both her lack of formal education and her status as a “poor little female figure (*pauperula feminea forma*)”;³⁰ she appeals directly to her supernatural experiences to account for both her intellectual insights and her authority to share those insights, as when she explains that the knowledge of Scripture she receives in a vision is what serves as the inspiration – and the authorization – for her *Liber divinorum operum*.³¹

This sort of appeal to divine authority via personal weakness increases in the later Middle Ages, as religious authority continues to be transferred away from the laity to the clergy; it appears in the writings of many prominent female mystics of the thirteenth through fifteenth century, including Angela of Foligno, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich. In the short text of the *Revelations of Love (Book of Showings)*, for instance, Julian first underscores the fact that she is “a woman, lewd, feeble, and frail” – and then immediately goes on to state that everything she knows and reports comes directly from “him that is sovereign teacher” (ch. 6 of the shorter *Revelations*). God’s charity is what both authorizes and impels her to share her “shewings.”³²

Although mystic experiences were often used to validate the teachings of individuals outside the clergy, however, they were only rarely used to undermine orthodox ecclesiastical authority. Mystic experiences were by nature private, but

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Barbara Newman’s “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation,” *Church History* 54 (1985) 163–75.

³⁰ *Epistola 2* (ed. Pitra, *Analecta*, p. 332). The *Vita* of Jutta of Sponheim, her teacher, suggests that Hildegard may, in fact, be exaggerating her lack of intellectual training. See Anna Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998).

³¹ See Godefridus et al., *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, ed. M. Klaes (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993) II.16.

³² For a discussion of how issues of authority function in the longer text of the *Revelations*, see Lynn Staley, “Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth-Century Crisis of Authority,” in D. Aers and L. Staley (eds.) *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 107–78.

within medieval Christianity the condition of their possibility was communal. Just as Aristotle used the human body as a metaphor for human society, so in the Middle Ages Christ's body was used as a metaphor for ecclesiastical society: individual believers were understood to work together to form a single, holy unity. As we will see, the importance of this corporate identity within medieval spirituality has further implications for medieval mystic conceptions of the role of active service in the good life.

CONTEMPLATION, ACTIVITY, AND THE GOOD LIFE

Given the final goal of mystic union, particularly as that union was understood within the apophatic tradition as transcending both physicality and knowledge, we might expect medieval mystics to come down on the side of contemplation in the age-old debate about the roles of contemplation and activity in the good life (see Chapter 33). Yet, although some figures (such as Richard Rolle³³ and Walter Hilton³⁴) lean in that direction, withdrawal from active life was in fact the rare exception rather than the general rule in both the affective and apophatic traditions. From Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century to Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, and even the secluded anchoress Julian of Norwich in the later fourteenth century, active involvement with religious, social, and political communities forms an integral part of most mystics' lives.

One particularly striking example of the attitude that the individual mystic life includes active involvement with community can be seen in the life of the nuns at Helfta, Saxony in the thirteenth century,³⁵ particularly Gertrude the Great (author of *The Herald of Divine Love* or the *Revelations*), Mechtild of Hackeborn (author of *The Book of Special Grace*), and Mechtild of Magdeburg (author of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*). Many of the numerous visions reported by these women were understood to have direct practical significance both for the community at Helfta and for their broader ecclesiastical and social communities. Gertrude, for instance, reports receiving a vision in which God gave her a choice between joining in unspeakable mystic union with Christ or conversing with God in such a way that she would later be able to share these

³³ For an argument that Rolle only grudgingly acknowledged the need for active service in the mystic's life, see Richard Kieckhefer's "Mysticism and Social Consciousness in the Fourteenth Century," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 48 (1978) 179–86.

³⁴ Although praising contemplation as the highest end, Hilton does concede in his *Epistle on the Mixed Life* that: "Thou shalt meddle [mix] the works of active life with spiritual works of contemplative life, and then does thou well" (ed. Ogilvie-Thomson, pp. 89–103).

³⁵ The classic treatment of this community is Bynum's "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta," in *Jesus as Mother*, pp. 170–262; see also Mary Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

conversations with others for their instruction. Gertrude chooses the second option (*Legatus* 4.2). In another vision, Gertrude hears Christ say:

[I]t is equally the same to me whether you rest in spiritual things or sweat in external labors, so long as you refer your will in free intention to me. For if I took pleasure only in spiritual exercises I should have so reformed human nature after the fall that it would no longer have needed food or clothing or the other things for which human industry exerts itself.

(*Œuvres* Bk. 3, ch. 68).

Gertrude's assurance of divine approval for a life involving active service is common to the Helfta community at large.

The brief and remarkable life of Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century Dominican tertiary, further illustrates this general attitude. Although at first strongly inclined toward complete withdrawal from public life for contemplative purposes, Catherine reports receiving a vision one day of Christ standing outside the door of her cell and calling her to join her community and to care for her neighbors.³⁶ She spent the remaining thirteen years before her death deeply immersed in social, political, and ecclesiastical affairs – in addition to caring for the sick and working to bring peace to her native Siena, she devoted considerable energy attempting to avert and then to heal the schism that split the church in 1378, dictating countless letters (over three hundred of which survive) and traveling to Florence, Avignon, and Rome to meet with ecclesiastical authorities. At the same time, Catherine retained a deep and abiding sense of mystical union with Christ, which at times manifested itself in dramatic physical ways, including the 'mystical death' in 1370 mentioned earlier, when she lay for four hours without breathing or her heart beating, and her receiving of the stigmata in 1375.

This emphasis on the importance of the active as well as the contemplative life can even be seen in the case of the late fourteenth-century anchoress, Julian of Norwich. Although physically removed from communal life and voluntarily walled up in a small cell attached to St. Julian's Church in Norwich, Julian had nevertheless gained a reputation as a spiritual counselor and advisor by the time Margery of Kempe came to consult her in 1413. This was in keeping with the general pattern for anchorites, who were encouraged to remain involved in the spiritual (and, often, educational) life of their communities even after removing

³⁶ *Legenda major* 216 (ed. in J. Bolland et al. (eds.) *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur* [Paris: Palme, 1863–1940] p. 915). For a more detailed discussion of Catherine's attitude toward the life of active service, see Karen Scott, "'This is why I have put you among your neighbors': St. Bernard's and St. Catherine's Understanding of the Love of God and Neighbor," in D. Maffei and P. Nardi (eds.) *Atti del Simposio Internazionale Cateriniano-Bernardiniano* (Siena: Accademia senese degli intronati, 1982) 279–94.

themselves from general society in order to devote themselves more fully to spiritual devotion; so, for instance, the *Ancrene Wisse* – an extremely influential thirteenth-century English handbook for anchorites – includes explicit recommendations for balancing contemplation with obligations to one’s community.³⁷ This recognition of the importance of and need for active service would be surprising in a book written for recluses, if not for the way in which it fits into a broader understanding of the mystic life as inherently communal.

Christian mysticism, both apophatic and affective, flourished in the later Middle Ages. Widespread reports of mystic experiences, however, led to increasing suspicion that such experiences (particularly affective ones) were not divinely inspired; as the “Age of Reason” took hold in the early modern era, mysticism diminished in both importance and popularity.³⁸

³⁷ For a comprehensive introduction to *Ancrene Wisse*, see Y. Wada (ed.) *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003).

³⁸ Many thanks to the audience of the 2008 Cornell Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy, Kris McDaniel, and especially to Elizabeth Robertson for helpful comments on this chapter.