

## CHAPTER 37

## Mysticism and the Vernacular

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The period from the second half of the thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth century was a turning point in vernacular languages' claim for universal potential in medieval Europe. Authority-laden fields such as theology and medicine made use of the vernacular as part of a transmission process that aimed to fulfill the needs of new and emerging audiences comprising educated lay people. In England alone several thousand medical and scientific texts (Acker 413) from this period are extant in the English vernacular, not to mention the large body of texts that continued to be written in the second English vernacular, Anglo-Norman. Herbals, prognostications, lapidaries, astronomical and astrological treatises, as well as academic medical treatises, mainly translated from Latin, flourished in England and on the continent, in the vernaculars specific to each geographical location (Acker 416–417). It is not insignificant that, in parallel to the translation and production of medical texts, the same period witnessed an extraordinary production of vernacular theologies in the form of mystical treatises, visionary accounts, pastoral and confessional manuals. Although antecedent periods had seen the emergence of impressive religious texts in the vernacular, this period was a particularly flourishing one for vernacular theologies. The causes for the emancipation of the European vernaculars against Latinate culture and, more particularly, how two domains such as theology and medicine oversaw the transfer of their authoritative content from Latin into the vernacular, are complexly embroiled in the socio-political events of the period and are difficult to pinpoint precisely. This cultural transfer, either by means of translation or original compositions, negotiated the reassessment of authority in a language which slowly found its own *Sitz-im-Leben* ("setting in life") against the powerful machinery of Latinate culture, for an audience emancipated from the need of learned intermediaries, such as priests or university trained medical practitioners.

The exploration of the corpus embraced by the term "vernacular theology" has significantly changed the landscape in the field of religious literature written in England,

and continental Europe to a lesser extent.<sup>1</sup> This corpus, consisting of a large variety of religious writings, has provided useful evidence for the contextualization of the role played by vernacular theology in late medieval ecclesiastical history. For instance, the Oxford translation debate that took place within the context of the late fourteenth-century Wycliffite heresy showed the degree of importance that the vernacular language received in its valuation as a successful conduit for the transmission of sophisticated theological matters (Aston 27–72; Boose, in Somerset et al. *Lollards* 217–236). Nicholas Watson's 1995 groundbreaking article, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England," suggested a new way of looking at the production of religious writings in the late medieval period by showing how political involvement in textual religious culture shaped the extant corpus that was produced from the thirteenth century up to the Reformation. One of Watson's important points is that Arundel's 1409 Constitutions, aimed at stopping circulation and production of heretical writings in the vernacular, had a larger impact and put to a stop the innovative and insular production of vernacular mystical theologies. Following Watson's article, studies of the corpuses of the so-called Middle English mystics (Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the Cloud author, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe) are now very strongly anchored in their cultural context. Also, "vernacular theology" as a category embraces a larger corpus of religious texts than that of the mystical texts and invites its close scrutiny, with an interest in the way this broad corpus participated in shaping the religious textual culture of its time and contributed to religious medieval mentality.

If the response to Watson has been generally positive, some scholars have argued for broadening the corpus even more, questioning for instance the neglect of medieval drama as a locus for serious theological debate and practice (Crassons 99–100) or noting that Watson's powerful and influential argument "focused on a limited chronological period, but also on a restricted range of treatises written for reading rather than for oral or public performance" (Gillespie 2007: 406). The spreading out of the landscape unveiled by Watson promises new and fascinating explorations of vernacular theologies characterized by performative and public dimensions. However, one of the side-effects generated by the broadening of this landscape is, at best, a move away from issues that are specifically pertinent to vernacular mystical theologies or, at worst, their relative neglect as part of broader discussions on vernacular theologies. Being now at the farthest point of the spectrum in the field, their role as part of the larger narrative has lessened substantially.

This chapter offers a vision of the making of vernacular mystical theologies in Europe within a larger perspective – encompassing linguistic, historical, social, and cultural paradigms. Our perception of the rise of the European vernaculars in the late medieval period is as yet far too patchy and does not allow for a comprehensive picture. Similarly, no large-scale attempt has yet been made in assessing the way in which vernacular theologies grew in continental Europe.<sup>2</sup> The material used as evidence for my points in this chapter relies significantly on the English material and does not offer an exhaustive perspective of the landscape of European vernacular contemplative texts; it argues, however, that both national and supra-national politico-religious events need to be taken into consideration as powerful agents in the shaping of this European landscape.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, this chapter considers the rise of expression of “mystical” or “contemplative feeling” in the vernacular as a foundational moment in the history of theology and emotion.<sup>4</sup> This new form of religious expression dramatically changed the way in which individuals perceived their own self in the larger cosmic order. Although relatively few individuals claimed a direct experience of ultimate relationship with the divine, the various textual expressions of the few who did led to the composition and circulation of a large body of vernacular mystical theologies, concerned either with sharing experiential knowledge or with providing systematic psycho-religious textual approaches in order to achieve it. Not all vernacular theologies are vernacular mystical theologies. Since the invention of the term “vernacular theology,” made jointly by Bernard McGinn and Nicholas Watson (Watson 1995: 823–824), its usefulness has been amply demonstrated for the consideration of the religious landscapes in general, boosting interest in specific genres (virginity literature, lives of saints) and broadening the horizon of textual vernacular religious culture in encouraging the study of texts that fell outside the category of the “mystics.” Given the need to narrow this scope for the purposes of this volume, in this chapter I shall focus on vernacular mystical theologies.

Under “vernacular mystical theology” is understood any text that either purports to provide the direct encounter of an “I-voice” with a divine entity, or any text that aims to provide tools or systematic strategies that enable such an encounter. It therefore excludes a large range of vernacular theologies, such as catechetical treatises, hagiographies, or edifying sermons or pastoral manuals, just to mention a few. This chapter is divided into four sections. The introductory section, “Contemplative Feeling,” addresses the way in which expression of contemplative feeling achieved its apogee via the conduit of the vernacular. It also makes a case for the intellectual sophistication of such a mode of thought. “Vernacular Mysticism and Experiential Knowledge” looks at the importance given to the investment of the self in the expression of an experience that has a profound individual connotation. “Women and Textual Culture” addresses the question of composition of vernacular mystical theologies and the role played by women within it. Whatever the importance of the experiential in vernacular mystical theologies, some of them are politically charged and show a desire to interact and possibly change the course of specific secular and religious contemporary issues. “Vernacular Theology Does Politics” provides several examples of such interactions with contemporary issues.

### Contemplative Feeling

Contemplative feeling is a core feature of vernacular mystical theologies, either as a particular mode of thought finding expression in a textual account that recounts it as an individual experience, or as part of a system that aims to provide the reader or listener with the tools to experience it (Renevey 2011). My own definition of vernacular mystical theology, interchangeable with “vernacular contemplative theology,” embraces a larger corpus of texts than the category of the mystics (Renevey 2011: 91–112), but is nevertheless limited to texts that address human beings’ capacity to psychologically

attune to a particular affective state conducive to a contemplative experience. As stated by Watson, contemplation is associated with “(1) the private cultivation of a loving relationship with God; (2) the humbly receptive scrutiny of God . . . and (3) an implied image of ascent to God.” (Watson 2011: 15). Although limited to these three main categories, the contemplative experience can take many forms and shapes, depending on the object of contemplation and the approach (cataphatic or apophatic, intellectual or affective) used to reach such a psychological state.

Theories of contemplation were well known in the west by the time vernacular mystical theologies made their impact on the western mystical tradition. In addition to the carefully crafted treatises dealing with theoretical aspects of contemplation that appeared in great numbers in the twelfth century among the Cistercians (see Chapter 16, this volume), Victorines (see Chapter 17, this volume), and the Carthusians, treatises providing first-hand experience of the contemplative experience also appeared in the Latin language more or less simultaneously. Both the theoretical and practical writings contributed to a better understanding of the role played by the *affectiones* in medieval psychology. A large number of treatises inviting contemplative activity made use of these discoveries performatively, based on intense scrutiny of the crucifixion, which aimed to bring about inner transformation of the self.

Affective meditations on the subject of Christ’s Passion and crucifixion accrue in enormous numbers during the late medieval period. The development of this specific form of contemplation has often been linked to the rise of Franciscan spirituality, a very important example of which was the Latin text, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, usually attributed to Johannes de Caulibus. Recent scholarship, however, has questioned the male authorship and, while not disputing Franciscan influence, has convincingly argued that gender is of greater importance here than Franciscanism. Sarah McNamer has argued that the original text of this influential Passion meditation is not the Latin text attributed to Johannes de Caulibus, but an anonymous Italian version that was considered by previous scholarship to be a corrupt and poor version of the supposedly Latin original.<sup>5</sup> This Italian text was written at the request of a nun, by a nun.<sup>6</sup> The Latin version, put together by Johannes de Caulibus on the basis of the Italian original, is therefore a Franciscan adaptation into which significant speculative theological parts are inserted. If, therefore, the role played by the Franciscans in the rise of the affective tradition of meditative scrutiny on the Passion is far from being insignificant, women’s role as important contributors to that tradition in the vernacular in the western Christian tradition deserves fuller attention.

Contemplative feeling expressed in the vernacular is therefore strongly associated to women’s participation in textual culture. Early thirteenth-century texts like the Canonici Italian meditation on the Passion, *The Wooing of Our Lord*, and Thomas of Hales’ “Love Run,” for example, share the particularity of being addressed to female recipients. They contribute to the invention of medieval compassion, which is achieved in these cases via an attentive consideration of the events of the Passion of Christ, with emphasis on the crucifixion. The capacity of these texts to move the soul towards a desire for God in his humanity is effected by the emotional response that they solicit. The human ability to “suffer with” (Latin “cum patior”) is highly gendered and requires from male

or female authors, listeners, performers, or readers an inner connection with their feminine side<sup>7</sup> (see Chapter 3, this volume).

If compassion constitutes an aspect of contemplative feeling, it is only one of the *affectiones* that characterize it. Vernacular texts that expose or solicit performatively contemplative feeling benefit from the complex investigations into the medieval psyche that were carried on at the monastic and scholastic centers from the twelfth century onwards. *Affectiones*, generated within the mind by the *affectus*, were systematically analyzed in the way they contributed to the making of a contemplative experience. Some *affectiones* or psychological dispositions, like fear, shame, compassion, or love, are used as part of the implementation of a state of feeling that a text wants to elicit. The systematic analysis by the Victorines as to the effect love has when directed towards a proper object of contemplation illustrates the degree of sophistication that marked twelfth-century psychology.<sup>8</sup> The transfer and application of this system into vernacular mystical theologies opened a new era in Christian spirituality. Contemplative feeling, as demonstrated by Gallus in his explanations about the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, engages both the *affectiones* and the *ratio* and induces sophisticated intellectual reflection. Clearly distinct from the speculative theology as practiced by the schools, the psychological dimension of this particular form of theology makes the vernacular an apt channel whereby experiments with the self in its connection with the divine can be explored more dangerously and more deeply, at the political and psychological levels.

Nuns, anchorites and hermits, followed by lay people educated in the vernacular, were able to explore their own interiority by using material made available to them in what became the new universal language against the hierarchically and conservative Latin. The vernacular allowed the exploration of new territories and the gaining of authority in new ways. If contemplative feeling and experience remained somewhat elitist and limited in terms of practice to only a few, its foundation on experiential knowledge required competence that was not exclusive to the academically trained but that was also possible for those who showed the right disposition for this new kind of theological inventiveness. Even if his mystical theology was one of the most sophisticated systems offered in the vernacular, the fourteenth-century *Cloud*-author warned against an approach that would be intellectual only (see Chapter 24, this volume). In this example, as in several other continental vernacular mystical theologies, the author shows a capacious and contagious confidence in what he has to offer to his readership, not as a system that is subservient to the speculative theology of the academy, but as a system based on a set of premises noteworthy for its audacity and innovativeness.

### Vernacular Mysticism and Experiential Knowledge

The shift from Latin to vernacular mystical theology was a turning point whose repercussions went beyond an intricate linguistic shift. It opened a completely new horizon for the couching of experiential knowledge lived in cultural and social contexts that were propitious to psycho-religious experiences. This new brand of mysticism addressed selves acquiring experience according to parameters exclusive to these milieus, in which they could discover their inner structural design with tools that allowed more

maneuver and allowed for new intertextual exchanges to which vernacular secular literature contributed significantly.<sup>9</sup> The vernacular therefore opened completely uncharted psychological and theological territories that, as in the case of Marguerite Porete's *Mirror* (last quarter of thirteenth century), destabilized and even threatened the church as an institution, and made the Latin mystical theologies rather outdated in the eyes of these vernacular mystical theology precursors. No longer being the preserve of elite masculine culture, vernacular mystical theologies become the arena where both male and female practitioners engaged in an energetic exchange whereby power relations were constantly assessed and renegotiated in the process of charting their boundaries.

Twelfth-century Cistercian spirituality played a major role in developing a mystical theology that emphasized experiential knowledge. Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs figure an "I-voice" that the listeners or the readers performed in their discovery of divine realities by experiencing affectively the love of God through the person of the crucified Christ. Bernard offered a journey that is mapped onto the crucified body, with a movement upwards from the nailed feet to the crowned head of Jesus. Meditation on Christ's wounds generated an affective response that can only be effective if actively performed by the readers or listeners. Influenced by the affective meditations that Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) had written for the attention of Countess Mathilda of Canossa, a devout and politically powerful woman who was a great supporter of the church, Cistercian mystical theology gave prominence to the love of God in a way that was innovative in the medieval west. This pioneering psychological approach took shape within the traditional literary monastic exegetical consideration of the biblical material. The emerging vernacular mystical theologies of the early thirteenth century owed a large debt to that innovative move in the twelfth century, even if the transfer was a very complex one, with a multiplicity of influences.

For instance, the role played by the Victorine canons in Paris in the promotion of the mystical life outside of the monastic setting was one of the many factors that contributed to the spread of the mystical tradition in the wider world.<sup>10</sup> Following the more flexible Augustinian rule, the Victorine canons favored an ascetic life modeled on Cistercian practice, while nevertheless showing a strong interest in pastoral matters. Their contact with vibrant academic Parisian urban life and their pastoral responsibilities towards Parisian students led them into an exploration of the mystical life with the tools of scholasticism. Richard of St.-Victor's (d. 1173) systematic approach to the mystical life, encapsulated in his *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Major*, stands as an impressive testimony to the continued interest in the mystical life by the Victorine canons and their desire to circulate it outside the monastic wall.

The overwhelming influence of the Latin tradition in the shaping of vernacular mystical theologies notwithstanding, it is also correct, I believe, to claim that these vernacular mystical theologies marked a new starting point in the history of western spirituality because they allowed for experiential knowledge to be conveyed or gained via the medium of vernacular languages. The move out of the monasteries, facilitated also by the pastoral zeal of the new mendicant friars in the thirteenth century, as well as by the prohibition of the foundation of new monastic orders by Canon 13 of the Lateran Council in 1215, created fertile ground for this shift. Beguines and beghards

in the Low Countries and in Northern France, hermits, anchorites, Franciscan and Dominican nuns and brothers all resorted to their respective vernaculars for the spread of their mystical theologies (see Chapters 19, 21, 22, and 23, this volume). *Van seven manieren van mine* (*The seven ways of divine love*), from the *Vita* of the beguine and then Cistercian nun Beatrice of Nazareth (d. 1268) stands as an early example of transference of mystical experiential knowledge from Latin to vernacular languages. Initially written in Flemish, the treatise was translated into Latin before being destroyed by the church authorities.<sup>11</sup> It offers an ambitious program providing the soul with seven ways of developing love for the divine. The treatise presents a sophisticated system in which desire is apprehended via affective and intellective means.

*The Wooing of Our Lord* (early thirteenth century), an affective meditation linked to *Ancrene Wisse* on thematic, linguistic, and manuscript grounds, resorts to the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs as a trigger for an affective performance focused on the crucifixion. The way in which the erotic vocabulary of the Song of Songs is used in this text differs significantly from the much more cautious strategies used by its early twelfth-century commentators, who deployed it in a carefully crafted narrative in which the allegorization of the characters as the soul and the Godhead prevents too carnal or emotional a reading. *The Wooing* instead calls the reader/performer to load semantically the terms of love with a more personal understanding of their meaning. Together with an address to the human person of Christ suffering on the cross, the investment of the "I-voice" with the highly charged erotic vocabulary in the loosely organized narrative allows for the deployment of personal affective states that have feminine characteristics, such as compassion and maternal love.

This text, as several others from this and other periods, whether written by men or women, attest to the role played by the feminization of mystical theology initiated by nuns and continued by the Cistercians, in the footsteps of the Anselmian meditative tradition. In the case of Porete and Beatrice of Nazareth, focus was placed on the soul's desire to come to a face-to-face with the godhead, and the moving of the soul to achieve that ambitious aim relies on a subtle blending of biblical and secular bridal imagery. In the case of other mystical theologies, spiritual desire was initiated and developed to a large extent by giving much prominence to the humanity of Jesus and by attributing highly feminine qualities to his crucified body. This process of feminization progressed alongside the development of vernacular languages as authoritative vehicles for the circulation of sophisticated theological thoughts. Perceptions of the divine became tinged with attributes most often associated with the feminine. From an angry, revengeful, and unpredictable God, a new vision of a loving, compassionate, and forgiving one emerged. Motherly and feminine qualities were given to God and, most particularly, to the second person of the Trinity, Christ.

However, the translation of this feminized mystical experiential knowledge into vernacular languages raises a series of questions. While Latin's ability at conveying and triggering affective experiential knowledge was not put into question, as for example the commentary on the Song of Songs of William of St.-Thierry can attest, the case of the vernacular, in contrast to Latin, was nevertheless particular in the way it enabled the expression of a subjectivity uncharted by the machinery of the Latin academic and monastic traditions, in which this subjectivity was initially shaped within a set of well-established communal rules. To claim that community did not play a role in

shaping the substance of vernacular mystical theologies is not in question, but they negotiate the place of the self in communities that are less rigorously charted and which therefore allow for the emergence of textual selves that have more idiosyncrasies than Latinate culture would allow.

Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, written in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, is a good case in point. It combined the learning of Latinate culture, of which Porete was not ignorant, with the discourse of secular *fin' amor* ("fine love," or courtly love) in order to expose in allegorical fashion a very daring mystical theology based on experiential knowledge, in a way that contrasts with more traditional forms of contemplation that had relied on the meditations on the Passion in order to trigger an affective response. The sophisticated and ambitious theology of *The Mirror*, probably composed in the rather loose beguine milieu of the town of Valenciennes, offers an account that subverted the prescribed mystical theologies offered in the secluded communities of twelfth-century monasticism. Indeed, whereas the latter built their system on the basis of a close anagogical reading of the biblical texts for the construction of a bridal mysticism that unambiguously depicts the soul's search for the divine beloved, the spousal mysticism of *The Mirror* blends bridal biblical mysticism and aspects of *fin' amor* literature to create the "mystique courtoise" (courtly forms of mysticism), also characteristic of the writings of Teresa of Avila (see Blumensfeld-Kosinski et al. 5–8).

The extent of the influence of the *Roman de la Rose* on Porete's *Mirror* appears both in the way dream-vision characteristics shape its general structure and allegorical personifications are given an important role in the soul's pursuit of spiritual love. The *Roman de la Rose*, written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung between 1237 and 1280, shows more concern for secular love and other matters than spiritual love, but the *Roman's* influence on European medieval literature spread beyond its own area of interest. The emergence of *mystique courtoise*, as found in Porete, and the subsequent tradition of courtly devotion characteristic of Digulleville's cycle of three poems, *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*, *Pèlerinage de l'âme*, *Pèlerinage de Jésus Christ*, owed a lot to the *Roman* in terms of structural design, allegory and modes of discourses.<sup>12</sup>

## Women and Textual Culture

Women's role as patrons and recipients of male-authored vernacular mystical theologies contributed to the invention of modes of discourses by authors eager to satisfy their specific needs. As Schirmer suggests for the Syon nuns in fifteenth-century England, women played a significant role in giving reading an agency in the construction of vernacular religious literature (345–376). That case can also be made for the composition of the anonymous *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1220), written at the request of three educated lay women, as well as for the sermons preached and finally written down by Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361), about which Margaretha Ebner (1291–1351), a member of the Friends of God, spoke most enthusiastically. Female agency set up a readerly culture that in turn played a key role in fashioning the agenda for vernacular mystical theologies in the late medieval period (Schirmer 354–357). It was importantly engaged in shaping vernacular mystical theology's innovative modes of discourses by

means of authorial agency or readerly agency, often taking place in a context of intimate familiarity with the author.

Vernacular mystical theology as a term defines a textual practice, one whose object is the codification of a contemplative experience or a contemplative system.<sup>13</sup> In many cases, experience and systematization of that experience for the possible use of apprentices in contemplation often go hand in hand. Richard Rolle (c. 1300–1349) (see Chapter 24, this volume) offered in his three Middle-English epistles a system based on degrees of love corresponding to a particular state of mind for the use of aspiring female contemplatives. While the object of these texts was the provision of a matrix from which the recipient could measure their own state of consciousness, they were not devoid of personal references in which Rolle positions himself as a significant intermediary between God and his female protégés. Elsewhere, Rolle encoded experience of his contemplative journey that served at a later stage to establish his reputation as a spiritual guide for the benefit of female beginners. Rolle and his female recipients stand as a good example of the gendered power relations that mark several vernacular mystical theologies. The marks of such tensions are textually embedded, often appearing as particular modes of discourses, some of them innovative to the extent of causing official ecclesiastical anxiety.

This opening up to the world of secular literature, and secular psychological structure, had a phenomenal effect on the way mystical theology developed in the west in the late medieval period and beyond. To come back briefly to Rolle, even if the Latin biblical practice of exegesis weighed heavily on the way in which he negotiated and conveyed in Middle English his own experience, he nevertheless showed awareness of the secular literary make-up of his female readers by shaping his material into a seductive epistolary attire that would appeal to readers of secular romances and lyrics. Similarly, both Marguerite Porete and Teresa of Avila's psychological make-up, as represented in their writings, disclose a self shaped by both religious and secular texts. As Slade shows most pertinently, novels of chivalry had a strong impact on the construction of Teresa's psychological make-up, which allowed for her visionary experiences to take place and be rendered textually (297–316).

New modes of discourses used for the expression of the contemplative experience combined Latinate literary techniques with secular ones, as in the case of St. John of the Cross's remarkable *Living Flame of Love*, the only piece that he wrote in response to a request, in this particular case from a devout laywoman, Doña Ana de Peñalosa, for whom he acted as a spiritual guide (see Chapter 28, this volume). The form of the commentary was used for further development and expression of the mystical thoughts that St. John of the Cross had embedded in the poetical part of the text. Such format, already put to successful effect in *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Spiritual Canticle*, combined different literary strands into a composite piece that conveyed St. John's experiential knowledge of the contemplative life in a most illuminating way.<sup>14</sup> In the case of St. John's *Living Flame of Love*, as in many other cases, women's agency in the production of vernacular theologies played a particular role, either as authors, patrons of male spiritual authors or recipients of texts.

Julian of Norwich's (c. 1342–c. 1413) own contribution to that particular textual culture as a vernacular author surpasses most other authorial modes of inventiveness

(see Chapter 24, this volume). The hermeneutical expertise demonstrated in *A Showing of Love* (also called the Short Text) and *A Revelation of Love* (also called the Long Text) is both an artistic and theological tour de force. The second, "long" text, in particular, shows the considerable sophistication and skill on the part of Julian in blending hermeneutic moments in with perfectly smooth prose that explicates the more experiential moments preceding it. The combination of these two modes of discourses within a flowing prose that even succeeds in preserving a sense of orality reached a level of perfection that still escapes complete explanation.

This aspect indicates yet again the individual dimension that characterizes vernacular mystical theology in contrast to the more communal dimension of its Latinate equivalent.<sup>15</sup> But individual excess may prevent the subtle development of contemplative feeling, as is sometimes said to be the case of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. late 1430s). However true that may be, this text invented the religious autobiography as a new mode of discourse for the English language and thus contributed to the broadening of Middle English textual culture as a whole.

*The Book of Margery Kempe* also points to the collaborative dimension of vernacular mystical textual culture. The composition of Margery's spiritual autobiography was the result of an intense and difficult collaboration between Margery and her scribes. Divine intervention apart, she was actively engaged in laying down readerly activities that consist in the reading aloud of mystical and devotional texts. The prologue to her book shows her to be in charge of the compositional process of her autobiography, with the scribe taking on at times a simple secretarial role. *The Book* is exemplary in the way it scrutinizes male/female collaboration. If other texts are less talkative on this aspect, it does not mean that they preclude assumptions about collaboration. On the contrary, brief references made by male-authored texts as to the role female recipients or textual subjects played in the compositional process hint at a more active role on their part in the manufacturing of texts for their edification and that of their spiritual confessors.

The *mulieres religiosae* movement of the Low Countries that began in the thirteenth century is a good case in point regarding the possible collaborative role played by these devout lay women whose life and visions were written down by male authors. *The Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek* (1246–1304), written down by the abbot Philip of Clairvaux who visited her in 1266/7, insists on her extraordinary and dramatic performance of the Passion, without making reference to her agency as part of the writing process. Recent scholarship shows, however, that Elisabeth, as probably other *mulieres religiosae*, was part of a complex network which involved other women, nobles and clerics, the latter often taking part in the writing process of their exemplary lives (Njus 285–317). In light of this new evidence in the case of the *mulieres religiosae*, it is no longer possible to live on with an image of saintly women completely oblivious of their external surrounding and only concerned about the state of their interior selves, as some of their *vitae* would like us to see them. That they were involved as part of a collaborative effort in the shaping of their external environment to create conditions conducive to contemplative feeling, and that they were engaged in one way or another in the compositional process designed to show their exemplarity cannot be put into doubt, even if it needs to be nuanced from case to case.

## Vernacular Mystical Theology Does Politics

Watson makes a strong claim for the political dimension of English vernacular theologies, a point which comes across clearly when one considers texts such as William Langland's (written c. 1360–1387) or several texts engaged in the Wycliffite controversy.<sup>16</sup> This section considers whether this claim hold true for vernacular *mystical* theologies as well.

I would like to suggest that, even a text like the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (second half of the fourteenth century) is politically charged. The treatise provides the most sophisticated mystical system based on the Pseudo-Dionysian apophatic theology in the English language. It is unique in its in-depth exploration of negative theology and its prologue makes important claims about the kind of audience and the kind of inner disposition necessary for a proper understanding of its content. Similarly, Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love* compellingly explores a hermeneutics that might make theological sense of her series of sixteen visions, which are based on variations on the theme of the crucifixion. Although such texts do not strike one as political acts in the first place, a reading that relies on broader contextualization discloses a political agenda. One could, for instance, read the *Cloud*-author's recourse to the apophatic tradition as a response to late medieval trends in affective spirituality based on the Passion that may have been written in part in response to difficult religious and socio-political issues, such as heavy taxation, the plague, and the instability of the church.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Julian's sophisticated intellectual reflection on the very matter used for affective meditation offered much more daring ways of interpreting the Passion material than the ones encouraged by the official church: in the difficult religious climate of the late fourteenth century, they could have been read as threats to the church's official policies towards matters of personal devotion.

Other vernacular mystical theologies address the political much more directly, questioning secular and religious political institutions and their personnel with a view to improving their machinery. *The Dialogue of Catherine of Siena* (1347–1380), written towards the end of her life in a state of ecstasy, showcases the way in which visionary literature acts as authoritative conduit serving political aims. The personal visions of Catherine of Siena are indissociable from their political agenda. The personal and the public spheres weave into one another, producing a highly contentious and ambitious vernacular theology. One of Catherine's political aims was no less than the return of Pope Gregory XI from Avignon to Rome, which took place on January 17, 1377. Her involvement with papal affairs continued during the Great Schism of 1378, with Catherine of Siena vehemently supporting the Roman claimant, Urban VI. Her *Dialogue* and her large collection of letters disclose a captivating entanglement of the personal with the public, of a self claiming a direct contact with the divine and thus establishing an authority that was used as a political weapon in the international papal politics of her time.

Vernacular languages' liminality makes them ideal repositories for the contestation of Latinate ecclesiastical and humanistic cultures. The ecstasies and prophetic visions of Bridget of Sweden (c. 1303–1373), Margery Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1436), and Elisabeth Barton (c. 1506–1534), to mention just a few, challenged political decisions established

by secular or ecclesiastic institutions (Watt 15–80). This particular form of contestation outside of the channeled sphere and using a servile, feminized, and oppressed language may have been more acutely devastating than criticism coming out from within the spheres of power, in the Latin language. The case of Elizabeth Barton deserves special attention, as textual traces remain only in the charters and records that document the troubled political and religious times linked to Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Barton's revelations, which she claimed to have received directly from God, spoke against the divorce and positioned its claimant on the side of the Catholic church against the king. In her case, however, evidence of acquaintance and support from highly powerful political factions suggest that the liminal voice from without that usually characterizes mystical theologies in their contention against orthodoxy's political decisions needs to be considered carefully. Barton's involvement in matters of royal government suggests an affinity with politically influential individuals (Watt 51–80). Clearly, then, Barton's voice has been partly preserved because of its highly political intent, rather than its sophistication in offering an account of experiential knowledge of the divine. In that respect, such a text raises interesting questions as to the way in which a voice expressing a claim for direct encounter with the divine and wishing to couch it textually can be obscured by too serious political involvement.

## Conclusion

The coming of age of vernacular languages as carriers of authoritative knowledge in the western world from the second half of the thirteenth century until their full maturity in the fifteenth century allowed the emergence of a new form of knowledge that would have a deep impact on the medieval mentality. While the wisdom and knowledge of the classical world in the fields of medical, scientific, and philosophical thought were passed on from Latin into vernacular languages, the Latin mystical tradition was appropriated and transformed for the creation of a new theology based on experience and strongly indebted to, and dependent upon, vernacular languages' universal reach.

The invention of vernacular mystical theology in the thirteenth century marked the beginning of a new religious culture and the democratization of mystical aspirations. It unlocked doors for a large number of male and female individuals who had been excluded from access to Latin culture tools, and it made possible the deep exploration of their interior landscape. The social, political, psychological and religious impact that this discovery had on western culture makes it as momentous an event as the discovery and exploration of the New World a few centuries later.

## Notes

- 1 See Gillespie, "Vernacular Theology," 401–420, who offers a good summary of the current situation. For example, focus on German devotional literature as literature and theology predates the use of the term by McGinn and Watson and suggests ways in which various European vernaculars have been studied independently of the suggestions made by the latter.

- 2 McGinn's ambitious and outstanding seven-volume series, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, covers a span that makes it impossible to pay specific and detailed attention to vernacular mystical theology in particular.
- 3 Gillespie's perspective on the post-Arundelian period, paying much attention to decisions that took place at the Council of Constance in 1418 and their effect on the English church, could provide useful information when applied as well to the continent; see Gillespie, *Looking into Holy Books*; see also Gillespie and Ghosh (eds.), *After Arundel*.
- 4 For the use of the expression "contemplative feeling," which I consider to be interchangeable with "mystical feeling," see Renevey, "1215–1349: Texts"; for a discussion on the topic of contemplation, see Watson, "Introduction"; for a discussion of the role of affective meditations as part of the history of emotion, see McNamer *Affective Meditation*, 1–21.
- 5 The original Italian text is found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Canonici Italian 174.
- 6 For a compelling demonstration of this point, see McNamer *Affective Meditation*, 86–115.
- 7 For a detailed account of the gendered nature of compassion, see McNamer *Affective Meditation*, 119–149.
- 8 For a better understanding of the roles played by the Canons Regular from the Abbey of St.-Victor in Paris in shaping medieval psychology, see the discussions on the writings of Hugh and Richard of St.-Victor, and Thomas Gallus in Chapter 17 of this volume.
- 9 See for instance, Newman. In Blumenfeld-Kosinski 105–123.
- 10 For an extensive discussion of Cistercian and Victorine mysticism, see McGinn *The Growth*, 158–418.
- 11 For a discussion of the anxiety vernacular texts generated on the part of the official church, see Pedersen 185–208.
- 12 See Boulton. In Blumenfeld-Kosinski 125–144.
- 13 Although I agree with Crasson that medieval theatre's dramatization of the whole of the Bible is highly theological and should therefore be part of the corpus of vernacular theologies, I nevertheless exclude it from the narrower corpus of vernacular mystical theologies; see Crassons 95–102.
- 14 For an English translation of St. John's writings, see *The Collected Works*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez; "The Living Flame of Love" translated by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez is also available online at *The Living Flame of Love* (5 July 5, 2011), [www.karmel.at/ics/john/fl.html](http://www.karmel.at/ics/john/fl.html); see also Barro in Leonard (ed.) 3–24.
- 15 The idea for modes of discourses is borrowed from Kemp 233–257.
- 16 See Watson, "Cultural Changes," 127–137; for further discussions on the political dimension of vernacular theologies, see especially the chapters by Watson, Waters and Poor in Somerset and Watson (eds.).
- 17 For an extensive discussion of affective meditations, see Sarah McNamer *Affective Meditation*.

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## CHAPTER 38

## The Social Scientific Study of Christian Mysticism

Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and Zhuo Chen

The social scientific study of mysticism can be said, like much of social science, to have a long history but a short past. Much of this depends upon how mysticism is defined. For purposes of this essay, we can contrast two definitions of mysticism. One, championed by such scholars as Bernard McGinn, focuses upon mysticism as an immediate and direct sense of the presence of God. As such, it clearly favors theistic traditions such as Christianity in which the presence of God is central. The other identifies mysticism with altered states of consciousness centered upon experiences of the dissolution of the empirical ego and the realization of union with a larger reality, which may but need not be identified as God. Those who favor the sense of presence of God seek to correct what they perceive to be an overemphasis upon experiences of dissolution and union that, they argue, have played a minimal role in the history of theistic traditions, including the Christian mystical tradition. McGinn goes so far as to state that if the focus is upon experiences of dissolution and union, then "there are actually so few mystics in the history of Christianity that one wonders why Christians used the qualifier 'mystical' so often . . . and eventually created the term 'mysticism' in the 17th century" (xvi).

These contrasting definitional options will determine to a large extent how one approaches the study of mysticism, which has a dual history. On the one hand, mysticism, identified as a "direct communion with God" (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 731), can be seen as a universal phenomenon that characterizes all theistic traditions (McGinn xv; Troeltsch 1981/1912: 732). It incorporates the widest variety of experiences indicative of contact with the "supersensuous itself" (Troeltsch 1981/1912: 283). On the other hand, in the narrow, technical sense of the term to be discussed below, "mystics" can emerge independent of a faith tradition, whether theistic or not.

Space limitations require us to use a rather narrow focus as we explore the social scientific study of mysticism. We are helped by what remains one of the most useful