

Concluding Reflections

Mystical Theology: Renewing the Contemplative Tradition

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Mystical theology, we proposed in the introduction, might be understood as preparing us for God's communication of himself to us. It is transformational, experiential, affective and active, but it does not ignore or dumb down the intellectual and rational aspects of the Christian faith. Rather, it seeks to engage and illuminate theology in such a way as to rescue it from *only* being a rational and intellectual exercise. The authors contributing to this volume have opened up a variety of ways in which we might understand this as happening. In these concluding reflections, we would like to draw attention to some cross-cutting themes that emerge from the chapters of this book, and especially to its much maligned concern with "experience". We shall also reflect on some of its omissions.

In our introduction, we quoted Jean Gerson as stating that mystical theology is acquired through the "school of the affect" and in Chapter I Kallistos Ware quoted Origen in support of his contention that affect – particularly the affect of human suffering – finds a place within the transcendent life of God. Interestingly, von Hügel appeared not to agree – suggesting that in God there is only compassion, but not passion – and Ware takes issue with this (as do we) on the grounds that it is difficult to see how true compassion can be exercised in the absence of passion. Compassion is, as Ware suggests, "co-suffering" and "in God there is both perfect joy and perfect suffering".

Louth does not directly discuss the topic of affect, or at least he does not use the same vocabulary as Ware to do so; the word "affect" and its derivatives do not appear in his chapter. Nonetheless, he draws attention, through his summary of Lossky's work, to a very important affective dynamic. Whereas Lossky starts with an

understanding of mystical theology as experiential and inward, he moves towards an understanding of this as “more to do with our minds and hearts being conformed to God and his revelation of love through the Son and the Spirit”. Mystical theology is thus not about ecstatic experiences, although it does not exclude these, so much as a seeking to be assimilated to the “reality of the love of God”. This reality is “manifest in the self-emptying of the Son in the Incarnation” and the human affective response to it necessarily begins with repentance. The affective dimension of mystical theology is thus far from being simply a seeking of affective experiences for their own sake, whether of suffering or of joy. It is rather a human response to the affective reality of the self-emptying love of God in Christ.

As Saunders so effectively shows, this dynamic finds admirable expression in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, yet rarely has an affective piety evoked such a wide range of responses, varying from warm affection through to outright hostility. Margery is at once both admirable and contemptible, not only to her peers but also to modern commentators, who seem to be divided in their opinions of her. Margery’s tears may have attracted much attention, then and now, but she was not unique in her weeping as an expression of piety. Most of her role models seem not to have evoked such hostile reactions.¹ Inner affective reactions are one thing, but public displays of emotion are another, and the outward expression of affective states invites, at least potentially, accusations and interpretations of insincerity, attention seeking and deception. Fourteenth Century English spirituality was well aware of all of this, as the writings of Margery’s contemporaries reveal. Public expressions of emotion easily become themselves the focus of attention, or else direct attention to the person affected, rather than directing attention to God.

Margery’s tears were often evoked by association with the passion of Christ, and especially so when she was on pilgrimage. Rosalind Brown provides ample testimony to the contemporary emotional responses of pilgrims and visitors to Durham

¹ We might wonder why? This is not the place for a thorough exploration of the question, but we might imagine that it has to do with Margery’s personality, perhaps with her lack of education, and also with her pursuit of her piety in such a public and unenclosed context. These considerations variously contrast Margery sharply with the lives of figures such as Bridget of Sweden and Marie d’Oignies.

Cathedral.² Many of the stories that she relates also provide testimony to the suffering that people bring with them to the cathedral, and their experiences of what they found there in the context of that suffering. Brown suggests that the cathedral points beyond itself – to the God revealed in Jesus Christ – and in this sense it serves the purpose of mystical theology to which Louth refers – presenting to us the love of God as something to which we must respond, and with which we will want to be assimilated. Spiritual wellbeing (as argued by McLean and Cook in Chapter 6) is concerned with orientation towards the Divine.

The suffering that people bring with them to Durham cathedral, and the prayer that it evokes, also illustrates the dynamic of prayer identified by Thomas Merton. We easily find ourselves looking for consolation and peace in prayer, and yet we make most progress when we realise “what a mess we are in”. As Merton says in one of his letters, quoted from in a footnote in Tyler’s chapter:

In the long run I think progress in prayer comes from the Cross and humiliation and whatever makes us really experience our total poverty and nothingness and gets our mind off ourselves [*Insert page number from Chapter 6, when known*]

Perhaps one of the most cogent criticisms of Margery Kempe (notwithstanding her many virtues) is that she often appeared (at least to others) to have her mind on herself. But one of the strongest arguments in affirmation of her spirituality is that her humiliation at the hands of others only seemed to strengthen her resolve in prayer. This humiliation can come from within as well as from the external world. Mystical theology in practice – at least in its psychological mode - is (as discussed in Chapter 7) concerned with having the courage to look within at the things that we repress and do not like about ourselves.

If mystical theology is concerned with the affective experience of looking within, and of experiencing the humiliation that the world evokes within us, it is also deeply concerned with the suffering of others. Bernadette Flanagan suggests that at the

² It is interesting that Margery Kempe appears not to have visited Durham – even though she travelled to most of the other popular destinations of pilgrims in medieval Europe.

heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of what "new monasticism" might mean "was solidarity with those who were voiceless and suffering". She draws further on the writings of Simone Weil and Etty Hillesum as examples of the contemplative dynamic that – far from turning in on itself – in opening to God is decentered so as to receive and respond to the suffering of the world. Whilst we have not explored the theme in any detail in this volume, mystical theology is also actively concerned with responding to the needs of a suffering world – as illustrated in the lives of Francis of Assisi, Florence Nightingale, Teresa of Calcutta and others.

A theme that has not been explored here – with the notable exception of Saunders' chapter on Margery Kempe – is that of the experiencing of visions and voices. This is in part because such phenomena are widely perceived not to be central to mystical experience – and yet, if not central, they are also far from uncommon. For von Hügel such experiences were merely a means to an end, only valuable insofar as they "convey some spiritual truth of importance". This begs the question as to how one discerns whether or not voices and visions do convey such truths.³

Margery sought advice from others concerning her visions and voices, and it seems that she found reassurance and affirmation from her advisors. Her voices were a more or less daily occurrence and had a reassuring quality to them. They affirmed her in the path that she had chosen, they affirmed the value of her tears, and they affirmed her in her understanding of her relationship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, there is little here to compare with Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*, or with Teresa's *Interior Castle*. They do not have the lasting and universal relevance to understanding of the Christian life that marks out, for example, the "little way" of St Thérèse.

Rosalind Brown gives an example of a visitor to Durham Cathedral who heard a voice at St Bede's tomb [*insert page number when known*]. This voice – which spoke only 3 words – was clearly life changing for the woman concerned and led,

³ We will not attempt to explore this important question here, but the interested reader is referred to Poulain, 1950, Mavrodes, 1978, and Rahner, 1964. The question has also been addressed by many earlier authors, for example, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but generally the Carmelite perspective has been one of caution about placing any weight at all upon such experiences (see, for example, Chapter 11 of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*).

eventually, to her ordination to the priesthood. Like Margery, the voice that this lady heard seems largely to have been for her own benefit, but rather than affirming her in a path that she had chosen, it seems to have caused her life to change direction.⁴ We know little about the details – but it would appear that this was a change for the better, and that it has benefitted the wider Church and not her alone.

As Saunders has indicated, voice hearing is now known to be a much more commonly occurring phenomenon than has previously been recognised. Whilst some such voices have religious content and associations, most experiences of this kind now occur outside the context of any particular faith tradition, albeit they may still be experienced as “spiritual” in some way. Are these mystical experiences? Presumably they are, sometimes, but not always. The question for mystical theology is not so much whether such experiences occur as how to judge their value as encounters with the divine, and this may in the end depend upon their impact upon people’s lives, for good or ill, as much (or more than) any intellectual or rational assessment of their truth. As William James famously suggested in the first of his 1901-1902 Gifford Lectures, “by their fruits ye shall know them” (James, 1985). For Brown’s anonymous pilgrim in Durham Cathedral, the fruits appear to have been very good.

We have not addressed here the possible interpretation or value of mystical experiences occurring in other faith traditions. We have deliberately confined ourselves to the Christian tradition, and we do not intend to enter here into the debate about whether or not there is a “core” mystical experience that is common to diverse faith traditions.⁵ This is not to say that there is not value in the study of other traditions, and we affirm the value of dialogue between such traditions. In Chapter 6 Tyler shows how Thomas Merton benefitted from insights drawn both from Sufism and Buddhism. However, we have undertaken our work within the tradition to which we belong and with which we are most familiar.

⁴ Margery’s initial vision of Christ, and the words that he speaks to her in this vision, had a similar effect on her. However, unlike Brown’s Durham pilgrim, Margery goes on to experience locutions of a more quotidian kind, and these seem to have a different quality; affirming rather than redirecting.

⁵ Notably, as proposed by Stace, 1973

The notion of experience – especially religious or mystical experience – is contested. As Nicholas Lash (1988, p.92) has argued, experience “includes a great deal more than mental goings-on”. Experiences are not separable from our interpretations and explanations of them, and inevitably include all kinds of assumptions, including religious assumptions, about the way that the world is. To talk of experience of God is especially problematic, given that God is not an object from which we can distance ourselves. Experience of God is, as Lash has also argued, “ordinary”. And a Christian account of “the experiences that matter most” should, as he suggests, have an appropriate Christological emphasis on the importance of suffering (Lash, 1988, p.251). However, we do not agree with Lash that

speaking of ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystics’ risks perpetuating the quite unchristian misapprehension that ‘experience of God’ is, at best, something esoteric and, at worst, close cousin got the paranormal (Lash, 1996, p.171)

It is equally arguable that speaking of Christian mysticism, and Christian mystics, affirms something at the heart of both Christianity and mysticism, and at the heart of wider “experiences of God”, which is fundamentally both fully Christian and fully human. The essays included in the present volume have – we think – illustrated this.

An emphasis on mysticism as “experience” (even experience of God) does, however, run the risk of distracting from something that is of fundamental importance to the nature of mysticism and mystical theology. Rather than being concerned primarily with experience, mysticism is concerned primarily with prayer. As Louth explained in his chapter, Lossky’s concept of “la mystique” had

little to do with ‘mysticism’, in its still common sense of something unusual and esoteric, but with the deepening of a life of prayer within the sacramental life of the Church [*Insert page number when known*]

Similarly, the new monastic communities described by Flanagan are primarily concerned with finding new and diverse ways of pursuing a daily life of prayer.

Poulain, in his classic treatise *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, begins by dividing prayer into two categories: the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary”, or mystical, varieties. Mystical prayer is that which

our own industry is powerless to produce, *even in a low degree, even momentarily.* (Poulain, 1950, p.1)

Whilst we would wish to distance ourselves from what now easily appears to be the crude supernaturalism that Poulain attributes to mystical prayer, we think that it is still helpful to recognise that prayer is not primarily something which we do. As Ruth Burrows (2007) has suggested, it is rather (at least in its more mystical forms) something which God is doing, in which we are graciously invited to participate. As von Hügel (quoted by Ware) asserted, we can indeed direct our attention to God, and as Merton (quoted by Tyler) suggests, we can pursue clarity in prayer. But attention only makes us receptive, and clarity is not always within our grasp. As Merton (again quoted by Tyler) says “the great danger to prayer is learning how to act in a spiritual way”. Prayer is, as Tyler says, about a change of perspective – an astonishment – which we cannot engineer.

For Margery Kempe – whether she be viewed as mystic or not – prayer was a primary concern. It was both something that she *did* (frequently) but also something that she *experienced* (as she would have it, miraculously). Brown emphasises Durham Cathedral as a place of prayer, and illustrates this with people’s experiences of prayer, at least some of which were both surprising and unexpected. If mystical theology is concerned with experience, then (as argued in Chapter 7) it is the experience of prayer as God’s response more than it is the experience of prayer as something that we do. However, it is fundamentally not about the seeking of experiences for their own sake. It is concerned with seeking God for his (or her) own sake, and God is encountered in our experiences of a suffering world as much, or more, than in visions and voices.

We hope you will agree with the conclusions of the essays gathered here that the study of mystical theology, rather than being an abstract or irrelevant side-show may,

in fact, turn out to hold the key to the renewal of the contemplative tradition during our troubled postmodern times.

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