

## NEW SEEDS, NEW HARVESTS THIRTY YEARS OF TILLING THE MYSTIC FIELD

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*This article offers a retrospective on the last thirty years of scholarship on medieval mystics. After surveying some recent resources, such as Bernard McGinn's multi-volume history, the Companions to Christian Mysticism, and the journal Spiritus, it discusses the varied approaches of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century work, notably the material turn and the linguistic turn. The former, embracing studies of the body and gender, emotions and eroticism, art and material objects, reacts against earlier conceptions of mysticism as concerned exclusively with the timeless, invisible, and transcendent dimension of human existence. Feminist scholarship, queer theory, history of the emotions, and the study of visual culture have all figured prominently, while the relationship between mysticism and political activism is identified as an area ripe for further study. Complementing the material turn, the linguistic turn has brought new interest in apophatic theology in the wake of Derridean deconstruction, but also entails fresh work on vernacular mystics and the role of vernacularity in disseminating spiritual wisdom. The essay closes with an account of imaginative theology and a call for more reading across linguistic and disciplinary boundaries, as well as the artificial boundary between sacred and secular writing.*

When I first approached the medieval mystics as a college student, a great many things puzzled me, from the plethora of visions to the mind-bending paradoxes. Among the lesser mysteries, I noticed that all the mid-twentieth-century scholars had letters after their names, like OSB and OFM, SJ, and OCSO.<sup>1</sup> Though I soon learned what those letters meant, it was years before I discerned the subtle differences in approach they conveyed and later still that I began to weigh the pros and cons of an academic field in which almost all the participants were professed religious. On the positive side, those monks and priests of the fifties and sixties had no need to translate the Latin they cited — and when they did, they got it right. Few biblical references and fewer liturgical allusions passed them by; they grasped their authors' embeddedness in worship as intuitively as their original readers had. Finely attuned to points of doctrine, they were perhaps obsessively concerned with the orthodoxy, or not, of the writers they studied.

In short, the small field of mystical theology was the domain of an in-group standing in direct continuity with their subjects. These celibate Catholic men,

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<sup>1</sup> These abbreviations stand (in English) for Order of St. Benedict, Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans), Society of Jesus (Jesuits), and Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists).

with the occasional learned nun, published books stamped with the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*. Many had personal experience of their authors' ascetic and contemplative practices, and all were steeped in the faith of the wider Church. Elementary mistakes in Latin or in doctrine, now so common, would have shocked them. Yet the scholarship they produced had the vices of its virtues. Addressed to an insider audience, it did vital work like establishing texts, cataloguing manuscripts, testing attributions, and tracing genealogies of influence. A few did far more; I remember especially the great Jean Leclercq and Dom David Knowles.<sup>2</sup> Yet this scholarship too rarely reached beyond its technical boundaries, and much of it was frankly dull. Women were studied only if they were canonized saints and even then consigned to a ghetto of "affective" mystics, if not overtly pathologized. Latin enjoyed such pride of place that most vernacular mystics were relegated to the philologists. There was little interest in the lay devotional climate from which mystics often sprang. Though few doubted that each order had its own distinctive spirituality, clericalism sometimes imposed a false teleology, judging earlier mystics by the standards of a developed Thomism or even of the Spanish Golden Age.

By the mid-eighties, however, that hermetic world had come unglued. The reasons are not far to seek. A generation after Vatican II, there were far fewer religious, and those who stayed had little interest in what used to be called "ascetic and mystical theology."<sup>3</sup> The Council's call to religious orders to renew the charisms of their founders diminished the pull of teleology. Meanwhile, beyond the boundaries of the Church, the cultural revolution of the sixties had sparked an explosion of interest in "mystical experience." One aspect of this religious renaissance, a passion for Hinduism and Buddhism, enabled some readers to experience medieval European texts in a new light.<sup>4</sup> Third-wave feminists, eager to recuperate the forgotten women of history, discovered that many had been religious writers.<sup>5</sup> The growing diversity of academic life on all fronts made it hard for

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York, 1961); David Knowles, OSB, *The English Mystical Tradition* (New York, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Adolphe Tanquerey, *Précis de théologie ascétique et mystique* (Paris, 1924). This discipline was developed by French Thomist theologians between the two world wars.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York, 1967); William Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York, 1970); Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds., *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1979); Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia, 1984); Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis, 2005).

any field, even Roman Catholic spirituality, to maintain the sealed boundaries of the past.

We have gathered here to celebrate *TRADITIO* and the living, changing nature of our traditions. In that spirit, I have been asked to reflect on some key developments in the study of mysticism over the past thirty years, ending with a retrospective on my own work. So, rather than try to present a full annotated bibliography, I will highlight what I see as the major monuments and significant trends. First, it would be hard to imagine the field today without Bernard McGinn's magisterial history, *The Presence of God*. Its three originally planned volumes have now morphed into six, with more to come.<sup>6</sup> With his unparalleled knowledge of the whole sweep of Christian mysticism, McGinn's work has become indispensable to all further studies. Fully integrating mystics of both genders in all languages, he has firmly guided historical scholarship to focus on texts (which we can study), rather than states of consciousness (which we cannot). His work blends ecclesial context with close reading, and he is especially skilled at teasing out the dense theological thought of writers, including women and other lay authors, once dismissed as merely "devotional."

For those who need a more concise *vade mecum* or, as the French say, "initiation" into the field, there are the *Companions to Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge and Wiley-Blackwell have already weighed in with their entries, with Oxford soon to follow.<sup>7</sup> These companions include chapters on the most important mystical movements, as well as background essays on such topics as the Song of Songs, heresy, and monastic prayer. Other chapters outline methodological approaches, unfolding the rich diversity that now characterizes this field. These approaches range from gender to the history of emotions, from visuality to vernacularity, from social science to neurobiology. So it is easier than ever to organize a course on Christian mysticism, whether one's focus is theological, historical, or theoretical. Another resource close to my heart is the journal *Spiritus*, founded by Douglas Christie in 2001.<sup>8</sup> It defines itself as "a journal of Christian spirituality" — a field that overlaps with mysticism, but avoids tiresome debates about who

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York, 1991– ). Six volumes have appeared to date: *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (1991); *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century* (1994); *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350* (1998); *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (2005); *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 1350–1550* (2012); and *Mysticism in the Reformation, 1500–1650* (2017).

<sup>7</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (New York, 2012); *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, 2001–), is a semiannual currently edited by Steven Chase.

does or does not merit admission to that privileged club. In its pages one can find essays on Meister Eckhart or Teresa of Avila — but also on John Calvin, Emily Dickinson, and Terry Tempest Williams, on the Christian spiritualities of Asia and the global South, indigenous and environmental mystics, interfaith dialogue, and political martyrs. As a new academic field, “spirituality” appeals to readers who call themselves spiritual but not religious, even as it challenges ingrown definitions of the mystical and widens our understanding of what experiential religion can be and do in the vibrant, imperiled world of modernity.

Like mysticism, the term “spirituality” has no single, unambiguous definition. One traditional interpretation ties both to the intellectual, invisible, transcendent, and otherworldly dimensions of human existence, as opposed to the bodily, visible, immanent, and thisworldly. If I had to name a single dominant trend in the study of mysticism over the last thirty years, I would say it has been a pushback against that notion. The title of Caroline Bynum’s latest book, *Christian Materiality*, epitomizes the counterthrust to a Christian spirituality centered on ideas and recondite inner experiences.<sup>9</sup> To interpret mystics in this new, earthier light has entailed three major emphases — on the body and gender, on emotions and eroticism, and on art and material objects. These material approaches have been complemented by sophisticated new ways of reading mystical language, going beyond old chestnuts about “ineffability” to explore the distinctive rhetoric of mystical texts.

The bodily turn was the first of these emphases. I find it fascinating that an obsession with bodies and embodiment swept across the humanities in the eighties, at the same time as personal computers, as if to reassert the centrality of our biological being at the dawn of the Digital Age. Of course scholars of mysticism had not altogether ignored the body before. They could hardly do so, for the mystical tradition insists on the urgency of such ascetic practices as celibacy, fasting, vigils, and flagellation. But older scholarship tended to read asceticism as a way of taming and punishing the body or, more positively, a discipline to restore it to its proper place — obediently submitting to reason like a wife to her husband. Post-modern scholarship took a different tack, reveling instead in the extravagance of the saints’ bodily practices.<sup>10</sup> What had once been read as a quest for judicious moderation was reinterpreted as a headlong plunge into the possibilities of the flesh, proper to a religion whose core doctrine is Incarnation. Bynum’s *Holy*

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> For a range of recent interpretations, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago, 1987); Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Boston, 1989); *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York, 1995); Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ, 1999); and Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia, 2004).

*Feast and Holy Fast* gave a powerfully gendered slant to this idea, linking women's penchant for extreme ascetic feats to their deep identification with Christ's feminized, suffering body.<sup>11</sup>

With the translation of French feminists, especially Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, such concepts as abjection, *jouissance*, and *écriture féminine* entered the scholar's toolkit.<sup>12</sup> Women, including mystics, were said to stand outside the phallogocentric order of language and thus to write not rationally, as men did, but "from the body" in a uniquely feminine way. A vast outpouring of scholarship, figuratively written in blood or milk instead of ink, taught us new ways of reading. Though much of that work may now seem excessive, we can no longer sideline or overlook phenomena like the mystical pregnancy of St. Birgitta, the mystical lactation of St. Bernard, the self-nurturing breasts of Christina Mirabilis, the causal link between fasting and amenorrhea, or the vulva-shaped fetish of Christ's side wound. Martha Newman refined this discussion by observing that an intensely physical, ascetic spirituality was correlated not just with women, but still more with lay status.<sup>13</sup> Thus the saintly lay brother Arnulf of Villers devoted himself to vicarious suffering for his clients through self-flagellation, just as the holy women in his milieu did through fasting or illness. The study of masculinity followed in the wake of feminist scholarship, questioning the ways that clerical celibacy required or enabled new definitions of what it meant to be a man.<sup>14</sup>

Men had long feminized themselves in the mystical tradition by identifying with the female figure of the Bride, or Anima, in the Song of Songs. This convention was calmly taken for granted until Stephen Moore's bold article "The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality" applied the newly minted term "queering" to show us how genuinely odd it is.<sup>15</sup> Suddenly a number of mystical texts seemed ripe for homoerotic readings, notably the visions of Rupert of Deutz, while the gender-bending of "woman-identified men" like Richard Rolle and Henry Suso

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Louis S. Roudiez (New York, 1982); Luce Irigaray, "La Mystérique," in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 191–202; *Le souffle des femmes*, ed. Luce Irigaray (Paris, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Martha G. Newman, "Crucified by the Virtues: Monks, Lay Brothers, and Women in Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Saints' Lives," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis, 2003), 182–209.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Reconstruction of the Gender System, 1050–1150," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis, 1994), 3–29; Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy, 1066–1300* (Philadelphia, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen D. Moore, "The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality," *Church History* 69 (2000): 328–49.

came into sharper focus. It turned out that not all women practiced “bridal mysticism,” and even those who did, like Mechthild of Magdeburg and Gertrude of Helfta, proved more interesting once the dusty heterosexual filters were removed. A spate of studies on virginity by Sarah Salih, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Anke Bernau, and others explored it as a “third gender” or else a distinct expression, rather than an abdication, of sexuality.<sup>16</sup> But erotic passion, while it may be the most frequently expressed emotion in mystical texts, is not the only one. As a rapidly developing interdisciplinary field, the history of emotions has contributed insights on many fronts. Sarah McNamer’s remarkable study of compassion links the rise of affective meditation with the emotional regime of “feeling like a woman,”<sup>17</sup> though her thesis has now been challenged by Michelle Karnes in a more cognitive account of imaginative devotions.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Bestul’s *Texts of the Passion* explores the darker emotions elicited by Passion meditations, notably anger and hatred of the Jews, in lieu of compassion.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps no mystic offers a more vivid emotional landscape than Margery Kempe, the subject of a new book by Rebecca Krug, who brilliantly analyzes Kempe’s striving for comfort against the emotions of shame, fear, loneliness, and despair.<sup>20</sup>

Mid-twentieth-century scholarship often bifurcated the canon of mystics, following a strand of Augustinian thought that privileged pure, imageless contemplation above imaginative visions or, *a fortiori*, the visions inspired by material images. On this basis, it was common to distinguish intellectual or speculative mystics from the less sublimely gifted visionaries or affective mystics. But it is hard to find a chemically pure specimen of either type, and Grace Jantzen among others has shown how the dichotomy offered yet another way to denigrate women.<sup>21</sup> Approaching this problem from a different angle, Jeffrey Hamburger’s extensive work on “the visual and the visionary” has done much to recreate the richly textured visual world of medieval mystics.<sup>22</sup> This was a world not just of high art, such as altarpieces and monumental sculpture, but also of liturgical

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2001); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture: Virginity and Its Authorizations* (Oxford, 2001); Maud Burnett McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York, 2003); *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Toronto, 2003); Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Bestul, *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society* (Philadelphia, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca, NY, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300* (New Haven, 1990); idem, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a*

and everyday objects such as relics and their reliquaries, textiles, rosaries, small handheld manuscripts, and devotional figurines. Joanna Ziegler, Elina Gertsman, and others have investigated some of the ways that worshippers interacted with these objects, not only by sight but also by touch, manipulation, devotional play-acting, and memory work.<sup>23</sup> It is not always easy to tell a material from a mental image — and why should it be, when one aim of devotional practice was to become fluent in moving from one to the other? A few mystics were firmly aniconic — Meister Eckhart, the authors of *Schwester Katrei* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* — but they were a minority. Although I know of no mystics who were artists in the strict sense, Hildegard of Bingen designed a cycle of illuminations for her *Scivias* that has garnered enormous fame. One of Eckhart's disciples, Henry Suso, defended his master's teaching in a highly abstract treatise, yet he too commissioned a cycle of images for his own works. Julian of Norwich developed an audacious speculative theology, but her visions began while she gazed steadily on a material crucifix. As art historians have engaged more vigorously with medieval religion, the gap between mysticism and devotion has been shrinking, especially for the late Middle Ages, when so many practices that originated in monasteries became widespread among the laity, mediated by books and other material objects.

A classic topos of the religious life has long been a distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, with the “mixed life” sometimes introduced as either an intermediate stage or a third, highest option. Many celebrated twentieth-century mystics are known for their political activism — figures such as Simone Weil, Dag Hammarskjöld, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day. This also holds true for some medieval mystics, notably Francis of Assisi and three women saints — Hildegard, Catherine of Siena, and Birgitta of Sweden — who engaged in tireless epistolary campaigns on behalf of social and ecclesiastical reform. Conversely, two men better known as scholars and conciliar politicians — Jean Gerson and Nicholas of Cusa — both wrote significant mystical treatises. There is no dearth of individual studies on these figures, but we have yet to see a good synthesis on the connections between mysticism and political action in the Middle Ages. Such a study would deepen our awareness of the many ways that

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*Medieval Convent* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997); idem, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Joanna Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c. 1300–c. 1600* (Turnhout, 1992); *Krone und Schleier: Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern; Eine Ausstellung der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, in Kooperation mit dem Ruhrlandmuseum Essen* (Bonn and Essen, 2005); Mary Dzon and Theresa M. Kenney, eds., *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!* (Toronto, 2012); Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna* (University Park, PA, 2015).

mystics, always aspiring toward the other world, remained solidly grounded in this one.

Another development, complementing the material turn of the late-twentieth century, was the linguistic turn. During the heyday of deconstruction, the field witnessed a flurry of interest in apophatic theology. Several of Jacques Derrida's disciples — and, indeed, the master himself — asked whether deconstruction might not be a form of negative theology, or at least its close cousin.<sup>24</sup> Denys Turner reexamined the apophatic tradition in this light, from Denys the Areopagite to the long-neglected Denys the Carthusian.<sup>25</sup> In *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Michael Sells memorably explored the same line of mystical thought in some of its greatest exponents: Plotinus, Eriugena, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart, along with the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the Christocentric, image-laden mysticism I have been discussing, which seems historically particular to the last degree, the apophatic tradition can aspire to greater universality in a skeptical age. It is easily assimilated to philosophical critique, sits loosely to religious institutions, and does not demand the same immersion in gooey materiality, yet leaves the door open to a possibility of transcendence. Eckhart's audacious "wisdom of unknowing," as McGinn calls it, is at once simple and radical, yet profoundly layered.<sup>27</sup> It has long made him the favorite Christian mystic of Buddhists and skeptics, as well as of many contemplative believers.

The ability of language to speak in paradox, to affirm what it denies and deny what it affirms, lies at the heart of mystical writing. Hence mystics walk a fine line when it comes to doctrine; some of Eckhart's propositions were condemned, while Marguerite was burnt at the stake. Mystical heresy is a matter of politics on the one hand, language on the other: what one is permitted to say can depend on who one is, whom one knows, and whom one wishes to address. Sometimes the operative question is the language of that address, which is one reason that some of the most exciting work of the last thirty years explores vernacularity. A vernacular is not a language *per se*, but the subordinate language in a dialectical pair — German vis-à-vis Latin, for example, but also English or Dutch vis-à-vis French. Writing in the vernacular has long been understood as an option *faute de mieux*, a second best for those who lack proficiency in Latin. But it can also be a matter of choice, as Sara Poor has shown in the case of Mechthild of Magdeburg, because the choice

<sup>24</sup> *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (New York, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York, 2001).



of a language shapes the authorial persona that is projected as well as the target audience.<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Watson has made bold claims for the English vernacular, arguing that its status as the mother tongue of *all* Englishmen and women enabled its role as a populist vehicle for claims about universal salvation.<sup>29</sup>

It is a striking fact that mystics, often women, stand at the emergence of many European vernaculars as literary languages. The sacred minnesang of Hadewijch, who moved easily between verse and prose, survives, while a once-substantial corpus of Dutch courtly song has perished. Mechthild of Magdeburg fills a similar place in German. If Chaucer was the greatest poet of late fourteenth-century England, Julian of Norwich was its greatest prose stylist. Marguerite Porete, who inherited a rich body of secular lyric and romance in the precocious French tongue, transmuted those genres in her mystical dialogue. Our understanding of all these writers has been immeasurably advanced by the work of literary scholars, especially Watson on Julian,<sup>30</sup> Patricia Dailey on Hadewijch,<sup>31</sup> and Zan Kocher on Marguerite.<sup>32</sup>

To situate my own work within this landscape, as I have been asked to do, feels a bit daunting. Every now and then someone outside of academia says perkily, “Oh, I’ve read your book!” Then I have to ask the embarrassing question, “Which book?” — and chances are ten to one it will be my first, *Sister of Wisdom*.<sup>33</sup> It’s painful to admit that my greatest publishing success is likely to be my dissertation — which is certainly not my best book, but had the good fortune to appear at the height of Hildegard’s modern fame. Its success owes a great deal to the pseudo-scholarship of Matthew Fox,<sup>34</sup> as well as the strict policies of the University of California Press: use footnotes for reference only, and no Latin

<sup>28</sup> Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Watson, “Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 145–88; and idem, “Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 85–124.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, “The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England V: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1992*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1992), 79–100, repr. in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra McEntire (New York, 1998), 61–90; idem, “The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*,” *Speculum* 68 (1993): 637–86; idem, “‘Yf Wommen Be Double Naturelly’: Remaking ‘Woman’ in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*,” *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 1–34.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Dailey, *Promised Bodies: Time, Language, and Corporeality in Medieval Women’s Mystical Texts* (New York, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Suzanne [Zan] Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls* (Turnhout, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe, 1985).

quotes at all. How I resented both Fox *and* my editor at the time! All the same, *Sister of Wisdom* marked the start of a research program that I hope has borne riper fruit. From my early work on Hildegard through *God and the Goddesses*, I have tried to show that the feminine Divine, in her many guises, is a mainstream presence in medieval writing: neither marginal nor heterodox, nor limited to authors of one gender. The prominence of Lady Wisdom in Scripture and the Divine Office, the sapiential Mariology of the twelfth century, the habit of Platonic realism, and the allegorical traditions stemming from Boethius, Prudentius, and Martianus Capella all contributed to a penchant for goddess figures across the whole range of literate culture, from mystical verse to political allegory.<sup>35</sup> I still maintain that the medieval Church was more comfortable with goddess language than the modern Church, despite (or perhaps because of) two generations of feminist theology.

Though I began to research *God and the Goddesses* in pursuit of Sapientia, Frau Minne, Dame Nature, and their sisters, I made some unexpected discoveries along the way. What I gradually came to perceive is the interactive character of these goddesses — the way such figures allowed authors and readers to embark on imaginative quests, dialogues, and intimate relationships with different aspects of divinity. Much like the more familiar, scripted meditations on the life of Christ, they enabled a play of sacred imagination — but in a more exploratory vein, untrammled by Scripture. To account for the popularity of such texts, I developed the concept of imaginative theology, defining it as “the pursuit of serious religious and theological thought through the techniques of imaginative literature,” such as dialogue and personification.<sup>36</sup> Not all works of imaginative theology are mystical, but some are, and it can be refreshing to study the new constellations that appear when we look at religious writing through the lens of literary genre, rather than authorship or doctrine. I found it especially interesting to compare texts by visionary mystics, such as Hildegard, Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Henry Suso, with the use of visionary conventions by such literary writers as Dante, Langland, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan. The differences may seem obvious, but the similarities are more intriguing and less often noticed. Peter Dinzelbacher identified a few criteria for distinguishing “authentic” from “literary” visions, but none of them are watertight.<sup>37</sup> In an obvious sense, all visions are literary because we only know about them through texts, constructed by their

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1981), 65–77; *idem*, “Zur Interpretation erlebnismystischer Texte des Mittelalters,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 117 (1988): 1–23. On the phenomenology of visions, see also Ernst Benz, *Die Vision: Erfahrungsformen und Bilderwelt* (Stuttgart, 1969).

authors with more or less artfulness. In another, more important sense, even clearly fictional visions can represent real spiritual exercises; they are interactive and performative, and often constructed for devotional ends.

More broadly, I think medievalists need to reconsider the idea of “authenticity” with regard to mystical texts. A fascination with mystical experience, influentially promoted by William James and Rudolf Otto, has proved valuable for many fields including the history of religions, the psychology of consciousness, and even theology.<sup>38</sup> But it is not the best guide to reading texts from the distant past. In particular, I see no warrant for the prejudice that a carefully crafted text, rhetorically heightened and composed with didactic intent, must be less authentic than an artless one jotted down in the fervor of inspiration. Wordsworth thought poetry took its origins from “powerful ... emotion recollected in tranquillity,”<sup>39</sup> and so perhaps does mystical *writing*, as opposed to mysticism *per se*. Few readers prefer Julian of Norwich’s original short text to her much longer *Revelation of Love*, the fruit of more than twenty additional years of prayer, reflection, and insight. The long text is more theologically profound, more rhetorically dazzling, and no less vivid in its recall of the initial experience. Although few mystical texts survive in their original sketches, there is no reason to think they would have lost more than they gained in revision. Medieval authors were hardly writing to convey snapshots of a private moment in time, but rather to teach and to inspire imitation. In my *Speculum* article, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’?” I tried to position the various types of visionary experience along a continuum, from uncanny spontaneous events through moments of ecstatic prayer, free-form imaginative meditations, and scripted visions of the sort that Margery Kempe cultivated, with the help of Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.<sup>40</sup> I argued that late-medieval clerics, anxious about heresy and false prophecy, sometimes willfully confused these categories; but we, who have less at stake, may strive for greater clarity about them.

In all my scholarship I have worked as a comparatist, crossing the permeable boundaries between languages, academic disciplines, men’s and women’s writing, and perhaps most important, sacred and secular.<sup>41</sup> Three decades of

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<sup>38</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 1902); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London, 1923).

<sup>39</sup> “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), repr. in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Andrew Keanie (London, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture,” *Speculum* 80 (2005): 1–43.

<sup>41</sup> Eadem, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Sacred against the Secular* (Notre Dame, 2013).

boundary-crossing have persuaded me that, while the spiritual and literary culture of the Middle Ages was wildly diverse, it was much less compartmentalized than our disciplinary filters often make it seem. So I have tried to create new conversations by introducing textual partners who seldom talk to each other, because one never knows where a spark may strike. If in thirty years I've asked more questions than I've answered, so be it; the journey has never been dull. For one question I often ask, but have never been able to answer, is: Why isn't everyone a medievalist?

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