



Book Reviews

Julia A. Lamm (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2013), pp. xvii + 650. ISBN 978-1-4443-3286-5.
doi:10.1017/S1740355314000175

'Why only Christian mysticism?' will be the first question of many of my colleagues on seeing this title. But no-one will ask it again when they have perused this volume, which runs effortlessly to 600 pages and contains some 40 chapters, many of which have clearly been produced with no small labour of condensation. The 'themes in Christian mysticism' which make up the introductory section – the Song of Songs, gender, Platonism, aesthetics and heresy – represent not merely five distinct topics but five distinct categories of inquiry. The next three sections span successive historical epochs: first from the New Testament (and contemporary Judaism) to the Benedictines, next from Bernard of Clairvaux to Nicholas of Cusa, and finally from the Protestant reformation to the twentieth century. The critical reflections which take up the read in section V include 'mysticism and the vernacular', the 'social scientific study of Christian mysticism', neuroscience and 'the interreligious perspective'. I am not acquainted with any volume of comparable scope: certainly there is none so up to date, or in which the level of knowledge and insight is so consistently high. I proceed to the critical observations that a reviewer must make in order to earn his copy, but anyone who only wants to know if this is a volume worth acquiring may stop here.

A project of this kind cannot be undertaken without a definition of mysticism. In her introduction (p. 3), Lamm quotes the 'influential' proposal of Bernard McGinn; 'a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it'. More in elaboration of McGinn than in criticism of him, she proceeds to delineate four 'characteristics of a mystical text' in the Christian tradition. It 'challenges a static or merely "exterior" understanding of God' (p. 10); it 'engages' the reader by presenting a 'more immediate, intense and transforming relationship with the living God' (p. 12); it 'explores' the paradoxical incommensurability of the describable and the indescribable (p. 14); and it 'claims a special kind of religious authority' (p. 15). All these four verbs – 'challenge', 'engage', 'explore' and 'claims' – have a modern tone that does not chime well with the exuberant and hortatory, yet diffident and descriptive style of many ancient and mediaeval authors – particularly, one might say, female authors; in any case, one cannot expect that contributors will be bound by any one redaction of the 'religious construct' (p. 468) whose changeful history in

Anglophone parlance of the nineteenth century is documented here by Eric Leigh Schmidt. The hallmark of mysticism for Brian Collis is a 'non-rational encounter' with the divine (p. 178), though his chapter on Syriac literature cannot be said to teem with such encounters. John Kenney, in his chapter on Augustine, observes that the 'vivid and intense' experiences which the term connotes in modern study are seldom recounted by ancient authors (p. 190). Kevin Hughes's essay on the Franciscans strikes a new note again with its talk of the 'social imaginary' and 'performative self-abasement' (pp. 282–85); liturgical activity is assumed to be native to mysticism in Peter Castella's reflections on the modernity of Nicholas of Cusa (p. 399); on the other hand, Ignatius of Loyola is a mystic for Edwards Howells because he 'finds God in all things' (p. 425). A shift in concern from the mystical object to mystical experience is noted by several authors and canvassed at length by Philip Sheldrake (pp. 533–49). This is of course a shift from what is by definition hidden to what is by definition manifest; when, however, George Demacopoulos writes that a 'mystery' in the New Testament is always 'something secret' and 'unknowable' (p. 267), he ought to add that even our awareness of the secret is possible only because the mystery has been revealed in Christ (1 Cor. 1.16). The tantalizing fecundity of such disclosures, never decipherable but by translation into new ciphers, is deftly illustrated by James Wetzel's 'quasi-epistemological reflections' on the fall (pp. 550–61).

In a volume produced by so many hands, omission and repetition are inescapable. The first two chapters include overlapping observations on the ancient use of the Songs of Songs (Ann Astell and Catherine Cavadini, pp. 28–31; Barbara Newman, pp. 43–44); no doubt its prominence here explains the decision of Charles Stang, in his evaluation of negative theology, to ignore the commentary on this text by Gregory of Nyssa. His analysis of the philosophical premises of the Cappadocian answer to Eunomius does not convince me that they had even grasped the logical point that a common nature entails three gods if all three persons in the trinity are divine. As a general observation, I wish that this volume contained either less philosophy or more. Willemien Otten's intriguing chapter on Platonism assumes too readily that emanation is one of its fundamental doctrines, and speaks summarily of 'participation' as a common motif in Platonic and Christian thought, without discussing whether the participant and the thing participated are identical in both systems (p. 63). The logical apparatus for the further examination of such questions was provided by the philosophy of the scholastic era; but in this volume Aquinas does not have one section of a chapter to himself, though he and his tutor Albertus surely brought something to the study of Dionysius that is not found in the Victorines and Thomas Gallus (Boyd Coolman, pp. 251–66). To Hegel Jacob Boehme and Francis Bacon were the Dioscuri of modern philosophy; had the editor thought the same, Boehme might not have been buried in three pages of Ruth Albrecht's essay on 'mystical traditions in pietism' (pp. 474–76). Wittgenstein was a mystic to Bertrand Russell, but not to Lamm. If I have one observation which is also a criticism, it is that the relegation of twentieth-century mystics to a single chapter by Mary Fröhlich (supplemented by Stephen Fields on 'modern catholic mysticism') tends to reinforce the common perception of the study of mysticism as a belated *post mortem* on a discourse that has died of natural causes.

M.J. Edwards
Christ Church, Oxford