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Christian Mysticism as a Threat to Papal Traditions

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From the Gnostics of the second century to the Waldesians of the thirteenth century, popular religion as practiced outside the structures of the Roman Church challenged the religious authority of the papacy and greatly influenced the decisions it made as it refined doctrines, decrees, and practices that it deemed acceptable to the church. Christian mysticism, although having its roots in the earliest days of Christianity, expanded and intensified in the eleventh through fourteenth centuries in Europe. Several aspects of the mystic Christianity in the Middle Ages challenged the traditions of the church, including the mystics' theological interpretation of scripture, their graphic visions, and their threat to established gender roles.

But first it is important to explain the basics of Christian mysticism. The term mysticism taken by itself embodies an idea that is prevalent amongst the world's religions: that a human has the ability to experience a deep connection with the divine on his or her own terms, without the use of scripture, doctrine, and other rules dictating how the person should perceive or believe in the divine. Mysticism "is an experience, not an idea"[1] which cannot be explained easily since it stresses the "inability of human reasoning to know the incomprehensible deity."[2] Commonly a mystical movement within a religion is viewed with skepticism from the doctrinal tradition; this was especially true with the medieval papacy and Christian mysticism. For although mysticism produced wonderful role models of Christian believers to laypeople, many of its aspects, i.e. the mystical interpretation of scripture, mystic visions, and challenge to gender roles, were "often on the periphery of acceptable practice"[3] and directly challenged Roman Catholic traditions.

There were two main phases of mysticism in medieval Europe. Twelfth century mysticism was characterized by personal experimentation of the laity's faith and subsequently having mystical experiences without the "benefit of theological training."[4] Evidence of this was religious community living and the production of theological literature that gained popularity in popular culture without papal sanction and control. The fourteenth century ushered in the second phase, an "age of intolerance and repression,"[5] which was characterized by the papacy's attempts to gain control or even eliminate these lay movements. As a result, many of the movements that started in the twelfth century deteriorated during this second phase. However a key idea ran strongly through both phases: the mystic should be "dissatisfied with a religion of external devotion" and must possess a spirit entirely dedicated to God through extreme asceticism and "inwardness."[6] Medieval mysticism stressed that the mystic needed to trust God to reveal himself to him or her, which he often did in areas that challenged papal traditions.

Studies on medieval Christian mysticism have placed heavy emphasis on women, their contributions to the movement, and the papal response to those contributions. Yet there were some things that the papacy had to suppress in both men and women, and one of these was the mystic's theological interpretation of scripture. The issue of personal interpretation of the Bible came to the fore with reformers such as Jan Hus and John Wycliffe in the fourteenth century who challenged the traditional idea that the papacy was the ultimate answerable authority in Christianity.[7] Although this issue did not permanently hurt the church until the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century, mystical interpretation of scripture started with Origen of Alexandria in the mid-third century CE and continued to be an important feature of a mystic's faith.

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[1] Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.
[2] Steven Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.
[3] Petroff, Body and Soul, 5
[4] Fanning, *Mystics*, 85.
[5] Ibid., 102.
[6] Ibid., 108.
[7] Judith M. Hollister and C. Warren Bennett, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 343.

As mystics read the Bible, they refused to simply read the texts and accept its message at a literal level. They exhaustively studied the scriptures and tried to find multiple meanings in order to grow closer with God. Song of Songs in the Old Testament is a prime example of this. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century wrote eighty-six sermons alone describing his understanding of the book.[8] Traditionally the speakers of the poem were thought to be two lovers, but the book became analogous to the relationship between Christ and the church. Mystics took the interpretation a step further and suggested in their writings that Song of Songs represented God's love and (sensual) desire for the mere human soul. The church was familiar with literal and allegorical interpretations of scripture; it was the mystics who added an anagogical, or spiritual, dimension to them.

Meister Eckhart, a Dominican preacher of the early fourteenth century, was an example of a "scriptural mystic"[9] who added spiritual depth to the verses he studied. In one sermon, he closely analyzed verse thirty-eight in chapter ten of the Gospel of Luke. He applied mystical meanings and themes behind every portion, and purposefully translated certain phrases incorrectly from Latin to vernacular German to fit his message.[10] This latter point was particularly seen in the way he translated a word as "a virgin who was a wife" instead of simply "woman."[11] This purposeful mistranslation was to make the point that in order for the soul to "be fruitful" in good works, much as a wife is fruitful in marriage, it must first "be ever virginal" and pure to accept Christ.[12]

A mystic's personal interpretation of scripture challenged the papacy because it undermined the role of the clergy, especially priests with congregations. The call for personal interpretation ignored the educated men who were trained to read and interpret scripture in a way that was acceptable to the Roman Catholic Church. Meister Eckhart was reprimanded for several of his works because of the many liberties he took when he translated and interpreted them for his audience. As mentioned above, his studies of divine scripture were tropological in nature, that is, he added moral significance to each passage not readily seen or interpreted. Because of his method of interpretation, he had to defend himself and his theologies many times throughout his life. A papal bull, "In Agro Dominico," was passed against him post humorously in 1329 and listed over two dozen statements from Eckhart's sermons "that clouded the true faith" and were deemed heretical by Pope John XXII.[13] It is interesting to point out, however, that with added "explanations" to some of his ideas, they might have been "able to take on or have a Catholic meaning."[14] This little disclaimer at the end of Eckhart's papal bull brings to mind the idea that mysticism was often on the "periphery" between doctrinal faith and heresy.

Visions were another area in a mystic's faith that posed challenges to the papacy. It was often an uncomfortable area of contention because they were frequently erotic in nature, especially the visions of beguine mystics. The beguines were religious sisterhoods or communities run by women in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and were an alternative to nunneries. They offered a Christian life rich in contemplation, education, and spiritual growth for the woman who did not want to marry, bear children and follow the traditional path of medieval womanhood. She could also come and leave whenever she wished since the beguines did not

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[8] Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 27.
[9] McGinn, Essential Writings, 35.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Meister Eckhart, "Sermon 2," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 36.
[12] Ibid.
[13] "In Agro Dominico," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 496.
[14] Ibid.

have official or formal monastic vows.[15] Many of the famous Christian women mystics came from the beguine tradition, such as Hadewijch of Antwerp who lived in the mid-thirteenth century.

Hadewijch's "Vision VII" was one she had "one Pentecost at dawn"[16] and contained many archetypes found in other visions by women mystics. The erotic and almost fanatical tone and desire to be with God was expressed by Hadewijch in this way:

> I desired to consummate my Lover completely and to confess and to savor to the fullest extent—to fulfill his humanity blissfully with mine…and to be strong and perfect so that I in turn would satisfy him perfectly…And to that end, I wished, inside me, that he would satisfy me with his Godhead in one spirit and he be all he is without restraint.[17]

This passionate yearning to feel God's presence was followed with an image of Christ as a child presenting himself to Hadewijch as the Eucharist.[18] The vision of Christ as a handsome young man or child was a common theme in women's visions, along with the vision of a mystical marriage with Christ.

Despite living in the repressive phase of Christian mysticism in the mid-fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena had two such mystical marriage experiences. The first was when she was twenty-one years old in which she envisioned a ring Jesus placed on her finger in the company of Paul, the Virgin Mary, and other important biblical and saintly figures.[19] The second and most graphic of Catherine's visions consisted of Christ opening the left side of her body and exchanging her heart with his own, forever joining them together.[20] This intimate visionary experience became the ultimate reason for Catherine's authority within fourteenth century papal politics (explained more below).

Graphic visions were a common feature of a mystic's faith. They comforted the mystic and served as proof that his or her methods of pursuing Christ were correct. They served as evidence that the mystic was closing the gap between humanity and the divine. For a religious person who was devoted to a life of chastity and ideally resisted any and all sexual temptations to have such strongly erotic desires of God posed a strange dilemma to papal tradition. The church had to ask whether or not it was acceptable for a Christian to have these visions and to feel an almost sexual desire for God's love and acceptance of their faith.

Mystical marriage was the biggest obstacle in this area of Christian mysticism. The church defined marriage as two people becoming "one flesh" as was suggested in Genesis. The essence of mystical marriage entailed that the same idea might be applied. Bridal mysticism suggested that the self ceased to be the created entity God made it, as implied in Julian of Norwich's (1342-1416) statement that she could have no "rest or true happiness" until "I am so bound to him that there is no created thing between my God and me."[21] If that was the case, bridal mysticism therefore suggested that the self became God. Hadewijch stated this idea in her vision, that this "is what it means to satisfy [God] completely: to grow to being god with God."[22] The Roman Catholic Church condemned such ideas and declared that it "is a blasphemy against God…to say

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[15] Fanning, *Mystics*, 94.
[16] Hadewijch of Antwerp, "Vision VII" in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 103.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Hadewijch of Antwerp, "Vision VII," 104.
[19] Fanning, *Mystics*, 129-130.
[20] Ibid., 130.
[21] Julian of Norwich, "Revelations of Divine Love," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 242.
[22] Hadewijch of Antwerp, "Vision VII," 103.

that a person can become God."[23] Aside from some of these aspects, doctrinal Christianity accepted visionary experiences since they served as testaments to the faith and were expressions of unity with God. Visions remained an essential part of mysticism throughout the Middle Ages.

A third area of papal tradition that mystics challenged was the concept of gender roles within society and the church. It was a "long-established custom" for women to be "passive, meditative, and receptive" to the religious authority of men.[24] There were few options for a woman who felt called to the religious life. But the development of beguine communities in northern parts of Europe and tertiary branches of the Franciscan and Dominican orders prevalent in the south widened their horizons in the Middle Ages. If she joined one of these communities, a woman was expected to join men in the performance of two types of penitential acts: ones of self-contrition and ones of mercy toward others.[25] Women took these acts of penance to heart and their "practice of self-denial was more austere than men's and, in some cases, perhaps self-destructive."[26] Women might have felt this "self-destructive" pressure from the need to prove their devotion and faith to their Christian brothers and the papacy; they acted out their faith "by living virile, masculine, styles of sanctity"[27] and suppressing their femininity. Their oftentimes extreme devotion to the spiritual life was inspirational to all Christians, but challenges arose against church tradition when clerical men relied on the spiritual insight and wisdom of these women.

In several cases men who served as confessors or mentors to mystic women were impressed by their faith and were inspired to learn from them. James of Vitry had this experience with Mary of Oignies (1176-1213), who was considered to be the first beguine mystic.[28] Mary inspired James to pursue his ecclesiastical career, and he became an archbishop and later one of the major supporters of the beguine lifestyle within the papal court.[29] He wrote a biography of Mary, in which he said he was often "moved with compassion" over her sufferings; she was known for "long fasting," "many vigils," and "great floods of tears" whenever her eyes beheld the crucifix.[30] She was so diligent in her self-sacrifice to worldly gain and pleasures that James "was never able to perceive a single mortal sin in her whole life and manner of acting."[31] If anything, she was almost too good at confessing and punishing herself, even once cutting off a significant portion of her own skin, that James, as her religious advisor, "sometimes reprimanded her" over this.[32] Yet for the most part, "this handmaid of Christ"[33] was an inspiration to her community and especially James. This relationship posed a difficulty to the church's ability to produce Catholic males who would continue accepted traditions: instead of gaining motivation from the governing body of the Catholic faith, James developed his clerical career at the behest of Mary, a woman who practiced "peripheral" Christianity and who was not even properly initiated as a nun. James' support of Mary's lifestyle and beguine sisterhoods was a challenge to traditional gender relations because he trusted the insights of these women and supported their faith to an extent that went beyond the minimal concessions originally granted to them by the church.

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[23] "The Compilation Concerning the New Spirit," in McGinn, 491.
[24] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 7.
[25] Ibid., 8.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 116.
[28] McGinn, Essential Writings, 60.
[29] Ibid.
[30] James of Vitry, "The Life of Mary of Oignies," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 61.
[31] Ibid., 62.
[32] Ibid., 63.
[33] Ibid.

Mysticism also provided a way for women to enter the much more public spheres of society traditionally reserved for men, namely politics and prophecy. Catherine of Siena was astonishing in the political roles she took. At barely thirty years of age she was sent as an ambassador to convince Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon, return the papacy to Rome, and reform the corruptions of the papal court. He complied and employed her into his own services as an ambassador.[34] She left behind a legacy of her good and influential works when she died at age thirty-three.

Female prophets in Christendom were common in the Middle Ages but societal reactions to their roles differed between earlier and later medieval mysticism. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a healer and abbess of her own convent and was considered to have prophetic powers from her contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux. She was an avid composer of both written accounts and musical scores inspired by her visions.[35] Her role, she felt, was to be an active mystic and to "admonish priests and prelates, to instruct the people of God"[36] on preaching tours. She was threatened with excommunication multiple times, including an incident when she was eighty and near her death bed, but always managed to convince her ecclesiastical peers of her mystical legitimacy[37] and had considerable freedom as a woman during this era.

Joan of Arc (1412-1431) was probably the prime example of mysticism's threat to established gender roles. Unfortunately for her, this teenage girl lived at the time the Roman Church was the most intolerant of bold religious claims. They had dealt with others like her, such as Guglielma of Milan in the thirteenth century.[38] Guglielma went so far as to proclaim herself an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, condemned the ecclesiastical office of her time, and declared that the only way it would be successful is if it were run by women.[39] Naturally, she was deemed heretical by the papacy. Joan was able to take her influence a step further and be very active on the military front since her powers were judged by the French court to be from God. But her position as a holy female prophet was quickly misconstrued after her capture by the English. Her age, gender, and daring spiritual claims provided a shocking spectacle for the English who regarded her divine revelations as demonic. She was attacked multiple times for the fact that she wore men's clothing—which ultimately symbolized her success and high level of power she achieved in society's public spheres. Fears of witchcraft were on the rise at this time and her behavior made her a "prime candidate for accusations."[40] She was burned at the stake as a warning to anyone, not just women, who dared to waver from tradition and claim support from God for their actions.

The mystic tradition of gender roles threatened not only the Roman Church but many areas in medieval life as well. Women like Mary of Oignies, although initially under the leadership of men, taught them many things about Christian living that they probably would not have gotten from traditional papal teachings. The women who occupied powerful places in public circles, from Hildegard of Bingen to Joan of Arc, went against the idea that women should remain cloistered in the home or at a nunnery. A woman was expected to only "pray for the salvation of

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[34] Fanning, *Mystics*, 131.
[35] Ibid., 82-84.
[36] Ibid., 84.
[37] Ibid., 82.
[38] Anne Llewellyn Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 2 (1985): 33. Barstow argues that Joan was just one in a long line of women that challenged the Roman Church with critiques and prophecy. Another example was Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) who was burned at the stake for her book *A Mirror for Simple Souls.* In it, she claimed that she did not need papal authority or the sacraments in order to be a true Christian.
[39] Ibid., 35.
[40] Ibid., 41.

their own souls and for the souls of their Christian community,"[41] and not take an active role in religious affairs. Not only did female mystics establish themselves in the spotlight, but the men who were involved in their lives respected and often helped them reach that high level of authority, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and James of Vitry. The challenge to preconceived gender roles in the Middle Ages was initiated by these female mystics.

Traditional ideas about faith and power in the Middle Ages were challenged by Christian mysticism. This form of popular religion posed complex problems that the papacy had to grapple with repeatedly. The movement lasted and succeeded in many ways, probably because the faith required extreme devotion from its followers. "Offer me [God] yourself and everything that is yours and do not take back what you offer," wrote Henry Suso, "let your heart always be ready to bear all adversity for my name's sake."[42] The people of the mystic movement took this idea to heart and were unrelenting in their desire to demonstrate their faith and obey God's orders to change the world around them.

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[41] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 7.
[42] Henry Suso, Chapter 4 in *The Clock of Wisdom*, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 237.