

## How Christian is Christian Mysticism?<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

The problem raised by the question: ‘How Christian is Christian Mysticism?’ is contained in the combination of the adjective ‘Christian’ and the noun ‘mysticism’. By talking about ‘Christian mysticism’, one seems to be assuming that there is a general religious reality, called ‘mysticism’, and that ‘Christian mysticism’ is one variety of it.<sup>2</sup> If that were so, what would become of the uniqueness of Christianity, in any strong sense? To be what it has always claimed to be, namely a final and unsurpassable revelation of God to the human race, Christianity cannot allow itself to be subsumed under any general rubric, such as ‘mysticism’.

That is to say, if Christian *mysticism* were what made Christianity *Christian*, then, assuming mysticism to transcend religious differences, it is difficult to see how Christianity could, as a form of mysticism, continue to maintain its unique identity. It would surely risk being absorbed and swallowed up by a larger reality, thus losing its specific savour, and eventually disappearing. Precisely this, of course, is what many feel has already begun to happen to it in the modern age, i.e. since the Enlightenment. Perception of such a possibility may have been why Karl Barth made the dramatic claim that Christianity was not a religion at all, but ‘revelation’ — religion (and mysticism) being for Barth<sup>3</sup> a human construct, revelation a divine work.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper given at the ‘Colloque Jean Sulivan. Littérature et Sources Spirituelles: L’Oeuvre de Jean Sulivan’, held at Maynooth, 16–18 October 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s comments in W. Beierwaltes, H. Urs von Balthasar, A.M. Haas, *Grundfragen der Mystik* (Einsiedeln, 1974), 39.

<sup>3</sup> See below, section entitled: ‘*Official suspicion of mysticism in Catholicism and Protestantism*’.

Now while it is true that the current semantic range of ‘mysticism’ may be so elastic and diffuse as to make the term almost vacuous, it does nevertheless appear to belong within the general sphere of religion.<sup>4</sup> This point, of course, may not have been of much comfort to a Karl Barth, but then not everyone would accept Barth’s stark dichotomy between revelation and religion. Furthermore, it seems to have been the Christian tradition which popularised at least the use of the term ‘mystical’ to cover a particular kind of religious experience.<sup>5</sup> However, it is undeniable that in more recent times, ‘mystical’ has been allowed to cover a multitude of outlooks, remote from its original meaning within Christianity. It has served, for instance, to register belief in ‘the realm of “what cannot be said”’;<sup>6</sup> to express inarticulate, otherworldly longings; to suggest a feeling of not quite belonging to this world; more ominously, to convey a deep sense of dissatisfaction with, or even resentment towards, the world we have to inhabit, thus opening the door to irrationalism.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, it has also long since acquired a quasi-magical dimension through its association with movements like the medieval Jewish cabbala.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dietmar Mieth, art. ‘Mystik’, *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3 (ed. P. Eicher), Munich, 1985, 151. It hardly needs stressing, of course, that ‘religion’, and by association ‘mysticism’, stands now in the minds of many for ‘obscurantism’, for the ‘unscientific’ and intellectually ‘unserious’. This viewpoint is reflected in, for example, Carl Sagan’s loaded characterisation of the clash between the Ionian thinkers of the ‘axial age’ and the defenders of traditional religious beliefs, as ‘the confrontation of the Ionian scientists with the mystics 2,500 years ago’ (C. Sagan, *Cosmos*, London, 1955, 240). Resistance to ‘mysticism’ can come, therefore, from very different quarters, as with Carl Sagan and Karl Barth.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R.P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (London, 1984), 1085: ‘Historically, the use of the word *mystical* to describe a special religious experience is peculiar to Christianity.’

<sup>6</sup> W.D. Hudson, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London, 1968), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Some trace the alleged link between the ‘mystical’ and the ‘irrational’ (and the resulting imprecision of the term ‘mystical’), to the age of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). Cf. Max Huot de Longchamp: ‘Le mot “mystique” a perdu toute précision depuis que J.-J. Rousseau et les romantiques l’ont appliqué à tout l’irrationnel souvent prêté à la chose religieuse’ (art. ‘Mystique’, in J.-Y. Lacoste, ed., *Dictionnaire critique de Théologie*, Paris, 1998, 774).

<sup>8</sup> The more esoteric sense of ‘mystical’ would appear to have been a guiding force in, for example, the thought of the modern German philosopher and literary theorist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), especially in his philosophy of language. Cf. Kolakowski’s comments on Benjamin in his *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. III, Oxford, 1978, 348: ‘Gershom Scholem, his close friend and one of the greatest present-day authorities on the history of Judaism, emphasizes that Benjamin had at all times a strong mystical streak . . . Benjamin had a lifelong interest in the hidden meanings of words, which led him to study the language of magic, the cabbala, and the origins and functions of speech in general.’

How loose and dogmatically unconstrained ‘mysticism’ and related terms have now become may be briefly illustrated by some random examples. Wittgenstein, for example, as just indicated, made some pronouncements on ‘the mystical’ towards the end of the *Tractatus*.<sup>9</sup> These have, however, been a cause of puzzlement to commentators. On the surface – if they are not sheer mystification – they seem to suggest that the most significant truth about the world for human beings cannot be expressed in words: a commonplace enough idea, though a significant one, which seems in one way or another to have struck most modern thinkers in the tradition of Romanticism from Schleiermacher’s time (1768–1834) onwards, to say nothing of many previous thinkers. But how Christian such an important notion is, is unclear. The same could be said of Fritz Mauthner’s ‘godless mysticism’, discussed at the end of his *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande* (1920–23).<sup>10</sup> And it is not entirely surprising, given the general direction and tenor of European thought and sensibility since the *Aufklärung*,<sup>11</sup> to find the French seer-poet Rimbaud (1854–1891), who had violently discarded the Catholicism of his upbringing, described by Paul Claudel as ‘un mystique à l’état sauvage,’<sup>12</sup> a phrase suggesting a view of Rimbaud in search of some transcendent truth beyond the workaday, convention-ruled world of most mortals, and beyond the specific doctrines of any religious tradition. A rather different, albeit fictional, character, Belacqua, the desultory antihero of Beckett’s early *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), who leads an apathetic, inconsequential existence around Dublin, is seen as ‘a dud mystic’.<sup>13</sup> And in his whimsical way, Borges uses the term ‘mysticism’ (*mística*) in a short piece, entitled ‘Diálogo sobre un diálogo’, to evoke a quasi-Platonising sense of the ‘unreality’ of this world and possible existence of another.<sup>14</sup>

A more sombre dimension of ‘the mystical’ in modern times is the way it functions as the obverse side, so to speak, of the coin of scepticism. Thus, Frank

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<sup>9</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London, 1972), 149f.: ‘It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists [6.44]. To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical [6.45]. . . . There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical [6.522].’

<sup>10</sup> Mentioned by Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 322.

<sup>11</sup> On this question see, for example, the present writer’s *On not understanding God* (Dublin, 1997), 53–59.

<sup>12</sup> In the ‘Préface’ to A. Rimbaud, *Poésies complètes* (Paris, 1960), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Jean-Jacques Mayoux (*Samuel Beckett*, Harlow, 1974, 90), who notes that in Belacqua ‘Beckett incarnates for the first time his wish for the physical, sentimental and mental immobility that should lead to a near-mystic quiet’ (p. 7). The title of Beckett’s book is possibly an echo of Acts 26. 14.

<sup>14</sup> See J.L. Borges, *El Hacedor* (Madrid, 1975), 20.

Kermode remarks of the relentlessly analytical Austrian writer, Robert Musil (1880–1942), that he is ‘a sceptic to the point of mysticism . . . caught in a world in which, as one of his early characters notices, no curtain descends to conceal “the bleak matter-of-factness of things.”’<sup>15</sup> Yet even this kind of ‘mysticism’ seems relatively benign beside the more menacing sense it acquired in relation to Heidegger: ‘Heidegger has been called the “mystic of nothingness”, an idoliser of nothingness. No wonder he fell completely for the “Revolution of Nihilism”, as Hermann Rauschning put it when defining and condemning National Socialism.’<sup>16</sup> Finally, the spectre of irrationalism is again conjured up and closely associated with ‘mysticism’ in a recent critique of postmodernist thought by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. In offering a prediction, at the end of their book, of what might follow postmodernism, which the authors consider discredited beyond redemption, they write: ‘One possibility is a backlash leading to some form of dogmatism, mysticism (e.g. New Age) or religious fundamentalism. This may appear unlikely, at least in academic circles, but the demise of reason has been radical enough to pave the way for a more extreme irrationalism’,<sup>17</sup> such a possibility being opened up, in their judgement, by postmodernism’s undermining of sane reason.

These introductory remarks are perhaps sufficient to show that in the modern world ‘mysticism’ has become at once a shifting, slippery concept and a potentially lethal reality in human affairs. This would tend to corroborate the contention that it is truly at home in the sphere of the religious. To see how its meaning has changed over time, and to try to assess whether it legitimately belongs within Christianity, we can now survey its emergence and transformation over the centuries.

### *Origins of ‘mysticism’: scriptural and patristic*

Linguistically at least, the actual term ‘mysticism’ derives not from an ancient Hebrew or Jewish context, but is of Greek provenance. The root element of the word, namely ‘*mu-*’,<sup>18</sup> – as in the verb ‘*múo*’ (‘to close’, either eyes or mouth,

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford, 1968), 128. Philip Payne describes Musil, in A. Bullock and R.B. Woodings (eds.), *The Fontana Biographical Companion to Modern Thought* (London, 1983), 541, as being ‘both neopositivist and mystic’.

<sup>16</sup> Klaus Mann, ‘Die Heimsuchung des europäischen Geistes’ (1949), in *Auf verlorenem Posten. Aufsätze, Reden, Kritiken 1942–1949* (Reinbek, 1994), 537f.

<sup>17</sup> A. Sokal and J. Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (London, 1998), 198.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Santiago Guerra, art. ‘Mística’ in *Diccionario Teológico: El Dios Cristiano*, dirigido por Xabier Pikaza y Nereo Silanes, Salamanca, 1992, 898: ‘The word *mystikós* is

suggesting introspection and the keeping of ‘secrets’ to oneself) – contains the notion of ‘something closed’.<sup>19</sup> Various words connected with this root occur in the vocabulary of Greek mystery religions, not least the word ‘mystery’ itself. The linguistically closely associated term ‘*muéo*’ was used in the mystery cults with the meaning: ‘to initiate into the mysteries’.<sup>20</sup> As for the notion of ‘closedness’ itself, it conveys no particular theological or religious meaning beyond the traditional idea, found in Greek thought from Parmenides onwards, that truth is hard, indeed impossible, to come by through human searching alone. It must be ‘disclosed’ or revealed.<sup>21</sup>

The term ‘*mystérion*’ is found in a variety of senses in Jewish scriptures of the Hellenistic period. In the Book of Daniel, ‘the Aramaic word *ráz*, translated in the Septuagint by the Greek word *mystérion*, “mystery,” has a specialised meaning, denoting primarily that what God has decreed shall take place in the future, that is, the eschatological secret to be made known.’<sup>22</sup> In the Book of Wisdom it occurs with the meaning of a secret cult.<sup>23</sup> But often it merely has the familiar or popular sense of a secret.<sup>24</sup> However, from the perspective of Christianity, the term ‘mystery’ is used most significantly in the Book of Wisdom to describe the origin and nature of Wisdom itself. For Wisdom is presented as the revelation of a mystery, i.e. of divine secrets. Yet unlike gentile secret cults, the mysteries alluded to are not reserved to an *élite*, but are to be broadcast to the entire world.<sup>25</sup> This notion of Wisdom as being both of divine origin or inspiration and hence unfathomable, and yet as being designed to benefit the whole world, is a notion that carries over into Christianity with the proclamation of the mysteries of the new faith.

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derived from the verb *myo*, which means *to close*, especially *to close the eyes*. Its pre-Christian use is connected with the ritual celebrations of the mystery religions, secret initiation ceremonies closed to the non-initiated, in which the *mystes* received a teaching not to be communicated to anyone else. Thus in its origin the term *mystikós* contains the idea of a secret reality accessible only to a minority.’

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Louth, ‘Mysticism’, in G.S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London, 1983), 272, henceforth cited as: *DCS*. This article owes much to Professor Louth’s writings.

<sup>20</sup> Dietmar Mieth, art. ‘Mystik’, *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3 (ed. P. Eicher), Munich, 1985, 151.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Louth, *DCS*, 272.

<sup>22</sup> David Hill, ‘Mystery’, in B.M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford, 1993), 538.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Wisdom 14. 15, 23.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Tobit 12. 7, 11; Judith 2. 2; 2 Maccabees 13. 21; Ecclesiasticus 22. 22; 27. 16f., 21.

<sup>25</sup> See Wisdom 6. 23f.

The rudiments of what was to become the language of Christian mysticism are thus to be found already in the Christian Scriptures. Indeed the expression ‘*mystérion*’<sup>26</sup> was used to sum up the Christian revelation (as in Rom 16.25–26 or Col 1.26–27; 2.2).<sup>27</sup> As ‘mystery’, the gospel transcended human reason and would forever remain hidden or closed from human understanding, even in the case of believers.<sup>28</sup> Another important aspect of the Christian ‘mystery’ – and this, superficially, connected it with the pagan mystery religions,<sup>29</sup> which also drew a sharp distinction between the initiated and the uninitiated – was that it had to be protected from unworthy intrusion by those unprepared to participate in it. But the ‘secret’ of Christianity was not, as was the case with mystery cults, something esoteric, available only to an *élite* of initiates. It was rather in principle universal, and hence to be universally proclaimed, even though it always would elude human comprehension. In this non-*élite*ist sense of mystery, Christianity was in harmony with the view found,

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. Ephesians 3. 9. For this passage, Louth (*DCS*, 272) gives the translation of the King James Version of the Bible (‘fellowship of the mystery’), which seems to rest on a faulty Greek reading. A more plausible translation of the now normally accepted Greek text would seem to be, literally, ‘the economy of the mystery’, i.e. ‘the [divine] dispensation or plan or unfolding or putting-into-effect of the mystery’.

<sup>27</sup> On the vexed question of whether the Christian term ‘mystery’ is rooted primarily in Hellenistic or Jewish soil, J.A. Fitzmyer argues that, while the term *mystérion* of course exists in Hellenistic sources, Paul’s use of it owes more to ‘the OT and Jewish apocalyptic writings of the intertestamental period’ (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.E. Murphy, London, 1993, 1389) than to the world of Greek mystery cults: ‘*Mystérion* is an eschatological term derived from Jewish apocalyptic sources; its application to the gospel gives the latter a nuance that *euangelion* alone would not have had, i.e., something fully comprehended only in the *eschaton*’ (ibid.). According to Edward Yarnold, the idea popular at the beginning of the twentieth century that St Paul ‘had radically altered the simple message of Christ by superimposing on it a theology of redemption and sacrament derived from the mystery-cults . . . is now generally admitted to be unfounded, for there is no evidence that many of the ideas that St Paul is alleged to have borrowed from paganism were in fact current among the gentiles of his time. On the contrary pagan theology may have borrowed the ideas from Christianity’ (*The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, Slough 1972, 56f.). See also below, n. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer (ibid.): ‘In presenting the gospel as “mystery,” Paul is implying that it is never fully made known by ordinary means of communication. As something revealed, it is apprehended only in faith; and even when revealed, the opacity of divine wisdom is never completely dispelled.’

<sup>29</sup> It is surely only with considerable modification, therefore, that one could accept the lapidary judgement of Camille Paglia when she writes: ‘The sex and violence in Christian iconography are an eruption of pagan mystery religion, of which Christianity is a development’ (C. Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, Harmondsworth, 1992, 246), even though it is also undeniable that Christian art accommodates ‘sex and violence’ within its borders as the New Testament, indeed the whole Bible, does within its covers.

as already indicated, in the Book of Wisdom, that divine wisdom was a mystery not to be confined to a secret band of initiates, but revealed as a divine, though hidden, truth to the entire world. The Jewish wisdom and apocalyptic traditions, which Christianity inherited, were thus clearly differentiated from the secret cults of the Gentile world whose mysteries were to be and to remain the exclusive preserve of their initiates.

The Christian notion of mystery was further elaborated by the patristic authors.<sup>30</sup> Indeed to get an accurate idea of what mysticism, classically, means in a Christian setting, we must look, in Andrew Louth's judgement, at how the Fathers employed terms like *mystérion* (mystery) and *mystikos* (mystic) in their writings. Louth differentiates three strands of meaning in the patristic use of the keyword *mystikos*, whose broad scope encompasses both the divine turning to the human race in Jesus Christ and the way in which that specific reality continues to be made present to Christian believers in history.

There is, firstly, the hermeneutical sense of *mystikos*. It was the term used to designate the way Scripture should be interpreted, if its real meaning were to be disclosed.<sup>31</sup> In practice this amounted to allegorical, but not on that account extravagant or uncontrolled, exegesis. This became such an ingrained and natural method of textual or linguistic interpretation in Christian circles that we find St Augustine typically choosing the Latin adverb *mystice* to describe the figurative sense in which he has used the expression the 'City of God' in the work of the same name.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, the term could be applied to the Christian

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. the comments in the art. 'mysticism, mystical theology', in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1997<sup>3</sup>), 1127 [henceforth: *ODCC*]: 'Language connected with "mystery" . . . was widely used in the early Church, often in a fairly routine way; the use of such language depends on the conviction that Christian doctrine and liturgy involved matters known only by revelation, which are incomprehensible to, or which need to be shielded from profanation by, outsiders and those insufficiently purified by faith and moral conversion. The sacred words of Scripture and the deeds of God recorded in Scripture and enacted in the Eucharist contain a "mystic" significance, into which believers can be progressively initiated by Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit.'

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Louis Dupré: 'The early Fathers applied the term *mystical* to the reading of Scripture insofar as the Gospel of Christ reveals a deeper meaning in the Old Testament text' (*The Deeper Life. An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, New York, 1981, 19). Arguably this way of reading the Old Testament is anticipated in the New Testament itself, as when in Eph 5.32 the term 'mystery' is applied seemingly 'to the exegesis of the passage from Gen. 2:24 cited in the preceding verse. Mystery may thus signify the "inner meaning" of a passage whose more obvious and literal sense is something other' (C.F.D. Moule, art. 'Mystery' in *IDB*, vol. 3, New York, 1962, 478).

<sup>32</sup> *De civ. Dei* XV, 1, 453 (*Corpus Christianorum* edition); reference in Kurt Flasch (ed.), *Hauptwerke der Philosophie. Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, 1998, 28, n.1. Flasch, presumably

sacraments, which were also known as ‘mysteries’.<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, and finally, the expression was used of ‘theology’ itself (i.e. ‘mystical theology’<sup>34</sup>) to designate the specific ‘knowledge’ of God available to those who held and practised the Christian faith.<sup>35</sup>

As Andrew Louth presents the Fathers’ understanding of ‘mysticism’, it was then rooted essentially in what they took to be the ‘spiritual’ truth enshrined

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with the popular, contemporary sense of ‘mystical’ in mind, notes that *mystice* signifies here ‘full of spiritual meaning, allegorical, not: “mystical”’.

<sup>33</sup> We just note in passing that, as in the debate over Pauline Christianity (see above, n.27), so also in relation to the Christian sacraments, there has been controversy over possible connections between gentile mystery cults and the celebration of the Christian initiation rites. The tentative answer E. Yarnold gives to the question: ‘were the rites of Christian initiation modified in the fourth century in imitation of the pagan mysteries?’, is ‘that the rites themselves were hardly influenced but the explanation given of them began to emphasize the element of mystery and fear’ (Yarnold, *op. cit.*, 61f.). It would in fact be odd indeed, if Christianity – a religion of incarnation – were to have ever remained completely, docetically one might even say, unaffected by ambient influences. To say nothing of the pastoral need, in the fourth or any century, to make the Church attractive to believers in a world offering glamorous or exciting alternatives . . .

<sup>34</sup> The expression ‘mystical theology’ was first used in Christian theology by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c.500), and it evidently refers in his mind to a more than purely intellectual apprehension of divine reality. Indeed for him, ‘our approach to God must be entirely governed by His self-disclosure in Christ and in the Bible. In addition to “philosophical theology”, which uses clear concepts and arguments, there is “mystical theology” which has to do with symbols and ritual (. . . *Letters*, 9. 1), leading us beyond intellectual notions of God to a real union with Him in the “truly mystic darkness of unknowing” (*Mystical Theology*, 1. 3); here the height of the “mystic words” of Scripture is apprehended and the “mysteries of theology” are revealed in silence (*ibid.* 1. 1). “Mystical theology” does not just persuade us, it acts on us (*Letters*, 9. 1); in submitting to the effects of the Church’s rites, we “undergo divine things” (. . . *Divine Names*, 2. 9)’ (*ODCC*, 1127). This aspect of Dionysius’ teaching was to be highlighted by St Thomas Aquinas when he stressed the need to ‘suffer divine things’ (*et patiens divina*), as well as to learn about them intellectually, if real *theological* understanding were to be reached (cf. *Expositio super Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus* II, 4, *ad fin.*, quoted by Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. T.A. Carlson, Chicago and London, 1991, 225, and the following note).

<sup>35</sup> Clearly, these three meanings were interconnected. As Rowan Williams, for instance, writes (*Teresa of Avila*, London, 1991, 143): ‘When the anonymous fifth-century writer we know as Denys the Areopagite wrote a treatise on “mystical theology”, he was writing about the way in which Christian liturgy displays the “mysteries” of God’s action in relation to the created order – the mystery of God going out from the depths of the divine nature to create and then to become incarnate in our nature, God binding creation together in communion and drawing creation back to its divine source. To understand this divine movement is to receive it into yourself in such a way that you are taken beyond all words and signs; and this openness or passivity to God’s movement (“suffering divine things”) is what “mystical theology” means.’

in the Bible and celebrated in the liturgy. Hence it was inseparable from the scriptural interpretation they practised, and it was nourished by their participation in the sacramental and communal life of the Church. For the Fathers the sacraments have a ‘mystical’ significance in the precise sense that, as with Scripture, they introduce believers into the mystery of Christ<sup>36</sup> and continue to encourage growth in the life of participation in that mystery.<sup>37</sup> In patristic times, therefore, ‘mysticism’ is not, as the name tends to suggest in the modern world, a free-floating, subjectively guided and motivated search for some unspecified, transcendent religious goal. Rather it is a submission to the transcendent, hidden truth witnessed to in Scripture, and present in the Divine Liturgy; and it is driven by a desire for ‘engagement with God . . . an engagement in which by the power of the Holy Spirit one is conformed to the Image of God, the Son, and so enabled to contemplate the Father.’<sup>38</sup>

‘Mysticism’ is then for the theologians of the early Church nothing vague, nebulous, or essentially subjective, but on the contrary the most concrete, real, objective, and substantial reality in which a Christian can hope to participate. For in participating in the mystery of faith the believer, as a member of the

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<sup>36</sup> Some patristic authors (e.g. Origen [c.185–c.254], or Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite) stress, in Platonising fashion, more strongly than others, the kinship between the human soul and the deity, and the final union of man with God through contemplation (Origen) or, as with Dionysius, by a process ‘in which the soul, passing beyond the perceptions of the senses as well as the reasoning of the intellect, is united with the “ray of divine darkness” and comes to know God though unknowing’ (*ODCC*, 485). Others, by contrast, (e.g. Athanasius [c.296–373], or Maximus the Confessor [c.580–662]) place more emphasis on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the Fall of man within creation, and the consequent need for the divine *Logos* to be made flesh in Christ, so that we could be divinised (cf. A. Louth, art. ‘Mystik II’, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. XXIII, Berlin, 1994, 553f., 559ff., henceforth cited as: ‘Mystik II’).

<sup>37</sup> This sense of ‘mystical’ seems to have been more deliberately and consciously preserved and fostered in the Eastern than the Western Church, judging, if one may, from the apparently larger and more dramatic role liturgy plays in the life of the Church in the East than in the West, and also from such ‘straws in the historical wind’ as, for example, the writings of St Nicholas Cabasilas (b. c.1322), described in the *ODCC* (259) as a ‘Byzantine mystical writer’, who in ‘his principal work, a set of seven discourses “Concerning the Life in Christ”, . . . explained how, through the three mysteries of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, spiritual union with Christ was to be achieved. He also wrote an “Interpretation of the Divine Liturgy”.’ There is a striking contrast also between the modern tradition of critical theology in the West, as opposed to the East. And some would see the roots of even Western critical theology in the kind of (subjective) mysticism characteristic, seemingly, of Western, as opposed to Eastern, Christianity. German Pietism, with its contribution to the German *Aufklärung*, would be highly significant in this regard.

<sup>38</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 272. See also, for the term ‘mystical’ in the patristic period, Balthasar’s observations in *Grundfragen der Mystik*, 42f.

Church, has the promise of enjoying an incomprehensible union with God. The union, even when enjoyed, still remains incomprehensible,<sup>39</sup> since it is union with the incomprehensible God, and to that extent it can be thought of as ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ or ‘concealed’, terms frequently occurring in discussions of ‘mysticism’, though not always in the sense intended by the Fathers.

### *Patristic mysticism and Platonism*

The Hellenistic culture in which the early Fathers attempted to express their beliefs was a culture intellectually shaped, above all, by Platonism. The latter’s relation to Christianity has been a subject of interminable debate.<sup>40</sup> What is of foremost importance, however, for the meeting of Christianity and Platonism, is that, when it occurred, ‘Platonism “was characterized by its predominantly religious and theocentric world view . . . Second-century Platonism is theological and otherworldly.”’<sup>41</sup> This so-called Middle Platonism ‘was “mystical”; it was concerned with the soul’s search for immediacy with God, a concern which was intensified with Plotinus and neo-Platonism.’<sup>42</sup> Platonism had therefore changed since the days of Plato, or at least its religious, more than its ethical or political, dimension seems to have been predominant, when the Fathers began using it as a vehicle for their thought.

The fact that the Fathers were influenced by a strongly mystical form of Platonism has led some commentators to say that their mysticism is simply Platonism. Nietzsche on one occasion rather rudely described Christianity as ‘Platonism for “the people”’.<sup>43</sup> But calmer spirits seem to accept the heart of the charge with equanimity. For Père Festugière ‘the mysticism of the Fathers is pure Platonism.’<sup>44</sup> Others, of course, do try to refute the accusation, seeing any form of mysticism as an intruder in the house of Christian faith.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. the comment in the *ODCC* (art. ‘mysticism, etc.’, 1127) on the early Church’s understanding of Christian revelation: ‘The mystery of God remains mysterious even in its revelation, so that we need to “hear the quietness” of Jesus as well as receiving His word (Ignatius, *Eph.* 15).’

<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford, 1981), xii [henceforth: *Origins*].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii, quoting R.E. Witt, *Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism* (reprint, Amsterdam), 123.

<sup>42</sup> Louth, *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> In the ‘Preface’ to *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1990), 32.

<sup>44</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 191.

<sup>45</sup> Anders Nygren is a case in point, raised by Louth, *Origins*, 192.

To limit ourselves to the mysticism of the Fathers, there is in fact strong evidence to suggest that identifying patristic mysticism with Platonism *tout court* is a distortion of the facts. Andrew Louth gives the following reasons<sup>46</sup> for rejecting such a simplistic equation: firstly, ‘For the Platonists God is an impersonal (or supra-personal) ultimate principle; for the Fathers God is a Person’ (195). Correspondingly, the Fathers have a stronger ‘concept of grace’ and a livelier sense than the Platonists that God’s search for man outweighs the human desire to ascend to God, indeed is its cause. Secondly, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* rules out the Platonist idea of the soul’s ‘innate divinity’ (197), so that ‘the fundamentally creaturely mode of divinization proper to humanity’ was a concern to be urgently tackled by (some) Patristic writers that has no ‘parallel in Platonism’ (197). It is in this context that the theme of Divine Darkness first makes its appearance in Christian thought, with Gregory of Nyssa (c.330–c.395) and Dionysius, and again there is no equivalent in Platonism (197).<sup>47</sup> Thirdly, and finally, as regards the relationship between mysticism and morality, ‘For the Platonists the moral virtues are the ways in which the soul controls the body so as to be as free from it as possible . . . But within Christian theology the moral virtues are the fruits of the Spirit, the evidences of the indwelling of Christ in the soul of the Christian’ (198). Festugière’s charge, in this area, that a typically Platonist-inspired spirituality (which he attributes to some of the Fathers) sees moral action as merely a road to the goal of contemplation, and is thus un-Christian, Louth answers by pointing out that a true understanding of moral virtues in the Christian life does not see them ‘as means to purify the soul so that it can contemplate, but as the fruits of the indwelling Christ’ (198).

At least an arguable case can, thus, surely be made for refuting the accusation that patristic mysticism has no profound connection with Christianity. But that is only to look at one side of the matter, important though it obviously is. We recall that the issues we have just been treating arose from the observation that the Platonism the Fathers encountered had a strongly mystical slant. What, however, about Christianity itself in the patristic period?

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<sup>46</sup> *Origins*, 195ff.

<sup>47</sup> The great Plotinus scholar, Paul Henry, S.J., remarks too on the (for him) surprising ‘absence of the notion of “darkness”’ in Neoplatonic mysticism (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, tr. S. MacKenna, abridged with an intro. and notes by J. Dillon, Harmondsworth, 1991, lxxxii). His conclusion upholds the genuinely biblical origin of Christian mysticism: ‘If the influence of Plotinus on the Christian mysticism of the West and of the East was incalculable, it remains true nevertheless that the principal and specific source of Christian mysticism is the Biblical Revelation’ (ibid., lxxxiii).

Had it changed since its earliest days? This question deserves to be aired too, and we shall return to it in our concluding observations.

*Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and medieval mysticism*

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite was the harvester of the ‘patristic mystical heritage’,<sup>48</sup> which was subsequently handed on to the Middle Ages. In general terms, it could be said that the Dionysian corpus functioned as a kind of charter for medieval Christian ‘mysticism’, a charter that was to enjoy, however, a wide range of interpretations. Some writers saw the climax of the mystical life – union with God – in affective terms, others in terms of will and knowledge, but knowledge of a non-intellectual kind, still others in intellectual terms (but where the intellect was supernaturally illuminated), and finally others in what one might describe as a union between God and the substance of the human soul.<sup>49</sup>

In the Dionysian writings themselves one can perceive the three levels of meaning of ‘mystical’ already outlined in relation to Scripture, the sacraments, and the knowledge of God pursued and described in ‘mystical theology’.<sup>50</sup> ‘Pursued’ is, though, perhaps not quite the right word since, according to Louth,<sup>51</sup> what the soul really desires is to pass beyond the ‘signs and concepts’ it employs in trying to understand the mystery of God’s love for us in Christ, so as finally to be ‘grasped’ by God and transformed by and into divine love itself.

There also appears in Dionysius the pre-Christian triad of purification, illumination, and union, which was already familiar to the devotees of the Greek mystery religions, and had been built firmly into the structure of Neoplatonism. But it was now given a new interpretation by Dionysius in line with Christian

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<sup>48</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 273.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *ODCC*, 1128: ‘Medieval Western interpreters of Dionysius tended to see “mystical theology” as leading, through the purgative and illuminative ways, to a loving union with God at the peak of our affectivity . . . , in which all intellectual operations are left behind. Thus some writers locate “mystical theology” entirely in the will and the affections. Others combine this doctrine with the Augustinian tradition that “love itself is knowledge” . . . , and maintain that “mystical theology” imparts a special kind of knowledge of God not attainable by ordinary intellectual operations. Both views find supporters among the Franciscans. Other theologians, especially Dominicans, held that “mystical theology” is precisely the ascent of the intellect, enlightened by faith, to union with God. J. Gerson [1363–1429] argued that “mystical theology” concerns neither the will nor the intellect, but a union with God in the essence of the soul (*Ep.*, 55).’

<sup>50</sup> Cf. above n.34 and n.35.

<sup>51</sup> *DCS*, 273.

faith, and was subsequently to find its way into the medieval *Summas*.<sup>52</sup> Thus, through ‘purification’ the soul seeks to overcome the effects of the Fall on the human will and intellect, ‘illumination’ occurs as the soul begins to live in the sphere of grace, and ‘union’ refers to the restoration of man to ‘the life of Paradise’. The quality of this final stage is suggested, as Louth points out,<sup>53</sup> by the use of the same term to describe it (*teleíosis*) as had served to indicate the ‘perfection’ or ‘fulfilment’ attained by Christian martyrs in death.

Dionysius’ influence was, for many reasons,<sup>54</sup> stronger in the Greek East than in the Latin West, where it was exercised mainly<sup>55</sup> through translations of his *Mystical Theology*. Since this was often taken in isolation from the rest of his writings, it meant that his influence from the twelfth century onwards, when the work became widely available and enjoyed enormous prestige,<sup>56</sup> was rather one-sided and moved mystical interest in a subjective direction.<sup>57</sup> For, the *Mystical*

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Balthasar, *Grundfragen der Mystik*, 54.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Mystik II’, 549.

<sup>54</sup> See A. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, London, 1989, ch. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Though not exclusively: Hugh of St-Victor (d. 1142), for example, wrote a commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius, ‘qui joua un grand rôle dans la diffusion de la pensée dionysienne en Occident’ (Jean Jolivet, art. ‘Saint-Victor (École de)’, in Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Dictionnaire critique de Théologie*, 1042). At a later stage, another member of the school of St-Victor, Thomas Gallus (d. 1246), ‘compiled glosses of the “Celestial Hierarchy” and “Mystical Theology” and more substantial commentaries on both these works and on the “Divine Names”’; his most influential work was an *Extractio* or synopsis of the whole Dionysian corpus, which came to be included in the Dionysian corpus used in the University of Paris’ (*ODCC*, 1617).

<sup>56</sup> It had, of course, along with his other writings been translated into Latin twice in the ninth century (by Hilduin of St-Denis and by Scottus Eriugena), but those translations had not been immediately influential. Of the translation by Hilduin, Louth writes that it was ‘so bad as to be unintelligible’ (A. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 121). Eriugena’s translation was a reworking of Hilduin’s. Eriugena also wrote a commentary on Dionysius’s *Celestial Hierarchy*, and a partial commentary on the Gospel of John as well as developing his own speculative system in the *Periphyseon* or *De Divisione Naturae*. He was the main channel through which a ‘mystical philosophy’ was conveyed to the West (cf. Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 563).

<sup>57</sup> Louth argues that a comparison between Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* shows that the former was in fact concerned ‘with the inner meaning of the sacramental rites’, and hence that ‘mysticism’ for Dionysius is bound up ‘with the hidden (*mustikós*) sense of Scripture, the sacraments and the life of the baptised Christian.’ Dionysius did indeed use Neoplatonist language and concepts (which in themselves could conceivably be construed as inclining religious belief in an introspective direction), but he was attempting to express the ‘Fathers’ common conviction about the hidden dimension of the human encounter with God, especially as this takes place in the liturgy’. Dionysius, Louth holds, would certainly have been surprised by the way his writings were used, especially in the West, to turn him into the

*Theology* of Dionysius was ‘an account of the soul’s movement beyond symbols and concepts into the darkness where God is known in an ecstasy of love.’<sup>58</sup>

*The move to subjectivity*

Louth suggests that the lurch towards subjectivity within mysticism from around the twelfth century is symptomatic of a wider pattern of change that can be observed in medieval culture, though it was destined to continue long after the Middle Ages had come and gone.<sup>59</sup> It was a change characterised, as many commentators have pointed out,<sup>60</sup> by the emergence of the individual and a growth of interest in the interior life of human beings. The roots of individualism, introspection, and interiority in Western culture are, of course, much older than the age of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). Indeed they reach back at least as far as St Augustine.<sup>61</sup>

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- ‘Father of a “mystical theology”’, in which ‘extraordinary, inexpressible inner experiences’ (Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 560) were seen as the heart of the matter.
- <sup>58</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 273. It is of some interest to note in passing that the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* translated ‘Mystical Theology’ as ‘Hid Divinity’, correctly in Louth’s estimation (see *Denys the Areopagite*, 125).
- <sup>59</sup> How naturally ‘mysticism’ is now thought of in individual or subjective terms scarcely needs to be laboured. To take just one example, in connection with Wittgenstein’s references to ‘the mystical’ towards the end of the *Tractatus*, mentioned earlier, G.E.M. Anscombe observes unproblematically: “‘Mysticism’ . . . in popular language . . . suggests extraordinary and unusual experiences, thoughts and visions peculiar to an extraordinary type of individual” (*An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, second ed. rev., New York, 1965, 169f.).
- <sup>60</sup> See, for example, Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing The Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1991), 337: ‘We now know that the most important development in medieval culture was not continuity with classical antiquity or perpetuation of the theology of the Church Fathers but rather innovative trends in imagination and feeling in the period from about 1080 to 1230 that may be called the romantic revolution and the discovery of the individual.’ With specific reference to Dante, D.L. Edwards notes ‘that all the punishment, in hell or in purgatory [in *La Divina Commedia*], is tailor-made to fit the individual’s outstanding sin, for the birth of purgatory in Dante’s imagination belongs to the general movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which has been called the “birth of individualism”’ (*Christianity. The First Two Thousand Years*, London, 1997, 258). R. Tarnas (*The Passion of the Western Mind*, London, 1996, 194) also finds the ‘expression of a deepening individualism’ in ‘Dante’s epic’.
- <sup>61</sup> Cf. Louth: ‘[I]n the twelfth century . . . Western theology had begun to develop its own characteristic emphases (though many of them can be traced back to St Augustine: the appreciation of inwardness, for example) . . .’ (*Denys the Areopagite*, 125f.).

As the Middle Ages advanced,<sup>62</sup> the tendency towards introspection only intensified and coloured mysticism accordingly. In the rise of a more subjectively oriented mysticism, Louth sees Bernard of Clairvaux and the Victorines (of the Abbey of St-Victor in Paris, founded in the twelfth century), as pivotal figures, and Teresa of Ávila in the sixteenth century as in some sense its culmination.<sup>63</sup> Typically in Western, as opposed to Eastern Christianity, as Jaroslav Pelikan observes, ‘the Dionysian strains were blended with the Augustinian, most notably in its best-known medieval expression, the Christ-mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux’.<sup>64</sup>

However, the growth of individualism not only encouraged a subjective mysticism, it also fostered – ominously – from about the twelfth century onwards ‘a certain anti-intellectualism and thus an incipient split between theology and spirituality.’<sup>65</sup> This anti-intellectual mood among some religious thinkers was exacerbated by the growth of the universities, despite the efforts of Dominican theologians like St Albert the Great and his most illustrious pupil, St Thomas Aquinas, to swim against the current and reinstate the demands of reason.<sup>66</sup> Such tensions would seem to be at the origin of the pervasive modern

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (London, 1977), 82f.: ‘When the period of the European mission had come to an end, the theological and practical center of Penance shifted from Baptism, administered once and for all, to the ever repeated Mass, and already this subtle change in the architecture of the Christian life contributed to a more acute introspection. The manuals for self-examination among the Irish monks and missionaries became a treasured legacy in wide circles of Western Christianity. The Black Death may have been significant in the development of the climate of faith and life. Penetrating self-examination reached a hitherto unknown intensity. For those who took this practice seriously—and they were more numerous than many Protestants are accustomed to think—the pressure was great. It is as one of those—and for them—that Luther carries out his mission as a great pioneer.’ This passage is from a famous article of Stendahl’s, ‘The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 56 (1963), 199–215, reproduced in the aforementioned book, 78–96.

<sup>63</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 273.

<sup>64</sup> J. Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 173. Bernard himself had, seemingly, little direct knowledge of Dionysius, the main channel through which the patristic mystical legacy had reached Latin Christendom (Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 564).

<sup>65</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 273.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 566: ‘According to Thomas . . . we know God, insofar as we know him at all, with our reason, and love simply moves our reason to seek him. The fullness of knowledge, however, true knowledge of God, is something that will only be granted eschatologically in the beatific vision.’ Interestingly, this Dominican tradition, with its insistence on the demands of the intellect, continued in Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328): ‘It was realized that no one philosophical definition could ever contain the One and Triune God, but to search for one was considered the primary and self-imposed obligation of the intellect. Thomist boldness found eventual fulfilment in the

division between the head and the heart, or as Louth himself puts it: ‘In Bernard we begin to see a disjunction between knowledge and love, thinking and feeling, that was destined to have a profound influence in the West.’<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Louth detects in Bernard’s separation of knowledge and love perhaps to some extent the cause of, rather than simply the reflection of, a new way of regarding human nature in the West. In the end only love is essential in uniting human beings to God, who is revealed to us above all in the figure of the suffering and crucified Christ.<sup>68</sup>

In the century after Bernard, Thomas Gallus, one of the canons of St-Victor in Paris,<sup>69</sup> before becoming abbot at Vercelli, worked on the writings of Dionysius and ‘seems to have been the first to link Dionysius’ apophatic theology<sup>70</sup> with the idea that the deepest part of the human personality is a non-

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mysticism of Meister Eckhart, who was persuaded that man, whose soul retained some sparks of the divine intelligence itself, experienced actual divinity through the union of his intellect with that of God’ (Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World. Europe from 1100 to 1350*, London, 1974, 268f.). Thus, any presumption of a radical and total distinction between ‘scholastic’ and ‘mystical’ thinkers in the medieval period would seem to be an over-simplification of the real situation. Franz Overbeck argued that ‘scholasticism’ and ‘mysticism’ belong together in the Middle Ages, because this was precisely the amalgam the early Church bequeathed to the medieval period, and to break with it would have been unthinkable for the medievals. The two approaches, or commitments – one ‘intellectual’ (*wissenschaftlich*) and the other ‘religious’ – to Christian doctrine were certainly distinct, but both shared, in Overbeck’s image, the one bed (cf. F. Overbeck, ‘Scholastik und Mystik’, in *Vorgeschichte und Jugend der mittelalterlichen Scholastik*, ed. C.A. Bernoulli, Darmstadt, 1971, 231–234). This judgement is echoed by J. Pelikan: ‘Although in modern times the mystical is often set over against the theological and is said to be more authentic or more subjective or simply more dithyrambic, the two forms of religious thought can in fact exist side-by-side in the same person, as they did in Bernard and in Thomas Aquinas and in many of the other scholastics’ (*The Melody of Theology*, 173). In this context, it is interesting to note Cioran’s observation on Eckhart, usually classed only with the ‘mystics’, whom he found the most readable, indeed now the only readable, ‘scholastic’: ‘Si Maître Eckhart est le seul «scolastique» qu’on puisse lire encore, c’est parce que chez lui la profondeur est doublée de charme, de *glamour*, avantage rare dans les époques de foi intense’ (E.M. Cioran, *Aveux et Anathèmes*, Paris, 1987, 59). To sum up, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, for all the tensions, there was no simplistic dichotomy in the medieval period between ‘theologians’ and ‘mystics’. Many were both.

<sup>67</sup> Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *sic affici, deificari est* [‘to be moved in this way, is to be deified’]: *De diligendo Deo* X 27], cited by Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 564.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. above, n.55.

<sup>70</sup> Apophatic, or negative, theology is ‘a way of approaching God by denying that any of our concepts can properly be affirmed of Him. The term is first used by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite in contrast with cataphatic or affirmative theology and symbolic theology (*Mystical Theology*, 3)’ (*ODCC*, 88).

intellectual mystical faculty for apprehending God.’<sup>71</sup> It was Thomas Gallus also who interpreted Dionysius’ ‘celestial hierarchy as being a kind of allegory of the stages of the soul’s ascent to God.’<sup>72</sup> In thus taking the objectivity of the Dionysian ‘celestial hierarchy’, ‘which explains how the nine orders of angels mediate God to man’,<sup>73</sup> and introjecting it into the individual human soul, Thomas Gallus was using ‘Dionysian notions’, against their author’s original intention, ‘to explore the inner depths of the individual’, thus contributing ‘to the “discovery of the individual”’<sup>74</sup> that is, as has already been stressed, such a significant feature of medieval culture. For his part, the anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* ‘was deeply influenced by the anti-intellectualist interpretation of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, as found in Thomas Gallus, and insists that, in this life, God as He is in Himself cannot be grasped by the intellect; between Him and us there is always a “cloud of unknowing”, which can be pierced only by “a sharp dart of love”.’<sup>75</sup>

It is, finally, important to bear in mind always that, in the later Middle Ages especially, mysticism was not just a response to the changing intellectual climate of the times. Powerful other factors were clearly also involved, in the shape of the very threats to life itself presented not only by war and destruction, but above all by plague. Here the impact of the Black Death (c.1350) can hardly be exaggerated. As William McNeill has written:

When the plague was raging, a person might be in full health one day and die miserably within twenty-four hours. This utterly discredited any merely human effort to explain the mysteries of the world. The confidence in rational theology, which characterized the age of Aquinas (d. 1274), could not survive such experiences. A world view allowing scope to arbitrary, inexplicable catastrophe alone was compatible with the grim reality of plague. Hedonism and revival of one or another form of fatalistic pagan philosophy were possible reactions, though confined always to a few. Far more popular and respectable was an upsurge of mysticism, aimed at achieving encounter with God in inexplicable, unpredictable, intense, and purely personal ways. Hesychasm among the Orthodox, and more variegated movements among Latin Christians – e.g., the practices of the so-called Rhineland mystics, of the Brethren of the Common Life, and of heretical groups like the Lollards of England – all gave expression to

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<sup>71</sup> ODCC, 1617. Cf. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 124f.

<sup>72</sup> Louth, *ibid.*, 124.

<sup>73</sup> ODCC, 485.

<sup>74</sup> Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 124. The ‘discovery of the individual’ is an allusion to Colin Morris’ book (London, 1976), of the same name.

<sup>75</sup> ODCC, 368.

the need for a more personal, antinomian access to God than had been offered by Thomist theology and the previously recognized forms of piety.<sup>76</sup>

*Continuities and contrasts between patristic and subsequent mysticism*

The shift from the objective mysticism of the Fathers, who showed scant interest in the subjective accompaniments of the mystical life, to the ‘subjective mysticism’ of medieval and subsequent times with its increasing preoccupation with the inner life of the individual mystic, seems to call into question for a scholar like Andrew Louth whether one is justified in using the same word for the two realities. However, despite the burgeoning of subjective mystical phenomena, such as visionary experiences, recorded in the medieval period especially in the writings of women like Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), and Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–1420), Louth also notes genuine links between such writers and what one might call the ‘classical mysticism’ of the Fathers because, for instance, of ‘the quality of engagement in the mystery of Christ’s death and victory evinced especially by the *Showings*.’<sup>77</sup>

But Teresa of Ávila unwittingly and unintentionally, in Louth’s judgement, was to open the way for a concentration on the experiential, even psychological, dimension of mysticism, through the manner in which she discussed different stages of prayer (‘prayer of recollection, prayer of quiet, prayer of union’)<sup>78</sup> in relation to ‘the psychological characteristics of such

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<sup>76</sup> W.H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, (Harmondsworth, 1979), 172f.

<sup>77</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 273.

<sup>78</sup> Louth, *ibid.* Cf. J. Pelikan, *op. cit.*, 174: ‘Teresa attempted to identify the “prayer of quiet” and the “prayer of union” as stages between ordinary prayer and the spiritual marriage of the soul with Christ, in which the will of the mystic and the will of God become one.’ Pelikan implies that John of the Cross was more ‘successful in schematizing the steps of mystical ascent, because he combined a poetic sensibility to the nuances of mystical experience with a theological and philosophical precision shaped by a study of Thomas Aquinas’ (*ibid.*). See also *ODCC*, 1128: ‘Late medieval writers stressed that the height of the Christian life could be understood only by experience, and “mystical theology” was increasingly taken to mean an experiential knowledge of God. Some writers specified particular subjective experiences as constituting or indicating the attainment of “mystical theology” (generally identified, from the 16th century onwards, with contemplation); this process reached its apogee in the Carmelite doctors, Teresa of Ávila and St John of the Cross, whose influence thereafter predominates.’

states.’<sup>79</sup> If then the subjective, psychological dimension of mysticism becomes paramount, it is only a short step to seeing human beings as all naturally – or psychologically – capable of mystical experience. Psychologically observable mystical phenomena can then be studied comparatively across religions and cultures.<sup>80</sup>

There seems, at any rate, to be a broad consensus that by the seventeenth century the older designation, ‘mystical theology’, had been replaced by the modern terms – ‘la mystique’, in French; ‘mística’, in Spanish<sup>81</sup> – and the term ‘mystic’, formerly only used as an adjective, starts to be used as a substantive.<sup>82</sup> All of these changes in usage point in the direction of a greater concern with ‘religious experience’ for its own sake, as a supposedly autonomous subject of study, and with the different individuals claiming to be the subjects of such experience. Almost inevitably, the original connection between biblical revelation and ‘mysticism’ grew ever weaker, with fateful consequences in the view of Hans Urs von Balthasar.<sup>83</sup> To take just one example mentioned by Balthasar, the development in France from the seventeenth century onwards of ‘the so-called affective theology of the baroque, which is objectively already

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<sup>79</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 273.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Louth, *DCS*, 274.

<sup>81</sup> The case with English would not appear to be very different. According to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd ed., vol. 1, Oxford, 1950, 1306), in English the adjective ‘mystic’ is not found until the seventeenth century (1615), in reference to ‘the ancient religious mysteries’, and a little later (1639) in reference to ‘that branch of theology which relates to the direct communion of the soul with God’; not until the nineteenth century is it used to mean ‘inspiring an awed sense of mystery’ (1842). As a substantive (i.e. a ‘mystic’) it is found in 1679 referring to ‘a “mystic doctor”, an exponent of mystical theology . . . one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the understanding.’ The modern noun ‘mysticism’ is not found until the eighteenth century (1736), with the following range of interrelated meanings: ‘The opinions, mental tendencies, or habits of thought and feeling, characteristic of mystics; belief in the possibility of union with the Divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation; reliance on spiritual intuition as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to the understanding.’

<sup>82</sup> Santiago Guerra, for example, writes (art. ‘Mística’ in *Diccionario Teológico: El Dios Cristiano*, 898): ‘In both paganism and in the Christian Church up until the seventeenth century the term *mystical* was used only as an adjective qualifying a noun. In the seventeenth century the noun “mysticism” [*mística* in Spanish] first appeared in the history of Western spirituality, and referred directly to a specific interior experience . . . From then until now the subjective, psychological and experiential aspect of mysticism has been to the forefront in discussions of the topic.’ See also *ODCC*, 1128; Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 547.

<sup>83</sup> See his ‘The Unity of Theology and Spirituality’, published in *Convergences: To the Source of Christian Mystery*, tr. E.A. Nelson (San Francisco, 1983), 17–45.

what the nineteenth century will call “spirituality”,’ encouraged a kind of religion in which ‘the concern is essentially for the progress of the devout, pious self, . . . Henri Bremond was able to summarize the whole splendid and yet secretly tragic history of this era under the horrible, fundamentally Schleiermacherian title of *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France . . .*’<sup>84</sup>

The growth of interest in mysticism in more modern times can, furthermore, perhaps best be understood – in the West at least – as part of the wider appeal to experience ‘as a way of establishing or assessing religious claims,’<sup>85</sup> and thus as part of a general turn to what one might call the ‘authority of experience’ in the post-Enlightenment world, a process from which religion did not, and probably could not, remain exempt. Indeed religion may have been the crucial driving force behind this movement, in so far as it sought to overcome the perceived barrenness of the rationalism of the *Aufklärung* by appealing to and exploring – some might say, exploiting – the existential depths and uncertainties and indeterminacy of the human condition. A key figure here is J.G. Hamann (1730–1788),<sup>86</sup> ‘the father of *Sturm und Drang*’<sup>87</sup> whose protest against the Enlightenment was of incalculable influence on later German thought. And his protest was religiously, or ‘mystically’ inspired, as Frederick Beiser explains:

It was during his Bible reading that Hamann had his shattering mystical experience. On the evening of March 31, 1758, he read from the fifth book of Moses: “The earth opened the mouth of Cain to receive the blood of Abel.” Reflecting upon this passage, Hamann felt his heart pound, his hands tremble. In a convulsive flood of tears he realized that he was “the murderer of his brother,” “the murderer of God’s only begotten son,” Christ himself. He began to feel the spirit of God working through him, revealing “the mystery of love” and “the blessing of faith in Christ.”

After hearing the voice of God inside himself, and after reading the Bible in his personal and allegorical way, Hamann came to believe that God was always communicating with him, if he would only listen.<sup>88</sup>

With Hamann, the ostensibly self-authenticating power of ‘mystical experience’ threatened to banish from religion alternative modes of argumentation. And

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<sup>84</sup> Balthasar, *Convergences*, 35.

<sup>85</sup> Louth, *DCS*, 274.

<sup>86</sup> On Hamann, see Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North. J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 18.

<sup>88</sup> Beiser, *op. cit.*, 20.

indeed from Schleiermacher<sup>89</sup> onwards religious thinkers have sought to legitimate (as the saying now goes) their claims about the truth of their theologies by appealing directly to ‘religious’ or ‘mystical’ experience.

*Official suspicion of mysticism in Catholicism and Protestantism*

Although we have stressed the persistence, indeed the growth of mystical tendencies in the post-medieval Christian world, it would, of course, be quite wrong to think that such growth was unchallenged or universally welcomed. In both the Catholic and Protestant worlds, enormous resistance was called forth by mysticism, even though it must also be said that in the case of Catholicism, official approval was eventually given to the great Spanish Carmelite mystics, Teresa of Ávila (1515–82) and John of the Cross (1542–91). The former was canonized in 1622, and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970, whereas the latter was beatified in 1675, canonized in 1726, and two hundred years later declared a Doctor of the Church. But mysticism tended to be scorned by many, especially in the Reformed tradition, as being subjective, self-indulgent, and almost oblivious to the Cross of Jesus Christ. In this context, one sometimes hears variations of the cynical remark about mysticism as ‘beginning in mist (myst-), centering in an “I” (-i-), and ending in schism (-cism).’<sup>90</sup>

To take some specific cases, the Catholic Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, was extremely alarmed at illuminist tendencies among the *alumbrados* in Spain, and at the spread of ‘Quietism’ in France. Bossuet, the Bishop of Meaux, bitterly attacked Fénelon and Madame Guyon and helped bring about their condemnation on charges of Quietism. The fear aroused in men like Bossuet by such movements was that they could have amoral consequences for society, and, more pertinently, lead to a bypassing of established Church structures and authority in the fleshing out of the human

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<sup>89</sup> It is curious that even in Eastern Christianity, in other ways so different from the Christianity of the Reformed Churches in the West, ‘a striking renewal of interest in mystical theology’ occurred, as Kallistos Ware points out (in H. Cunliffe-Jones, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine*, Edinburgh, 1978, 455), in the second half of the eighteenth century, in the ‘Hesychast Renaissance’. [Hesychasm was ‘the tradition of inner, mystical prayer associated above all with the monks of Mount Athos. Its distant origins extend back to the 4th–5th centuries . . . Hesychasm in its developed form finds full expression in the works of . . . especially St Gregory Palamas . . . of the 14th century’ (*ODCC*, 763).] Cf. Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 576f.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis Tamburello, O.F.M., *Ordinary Mysticism* (N.Y./Mahwah, N.J., 1996), 7.

relationship to God.<sup>91</sup> Catholic fear of mysticism was, in short, institutionally motivated: if God could be reached privately, so to speak, without recourse to the sacraments or religious services and practices approved and organised by the Church, that would obviously in the long run threaten to make the Church redundant.

The hostility to mysticism on the Protestant side had a somewhat different rationale, and was possibly more theologically entrenched. So much so, in fact, that some Protestant writers have even challenged the view that Christian mysticism is possible. Yet, as Andrew Louth points out, a book entitled *The Protestant Mystics* was written to refute the charge that ‘there are *no* Protestant mystics.’<sup>92</sup> However, the reluctance to embrace mysticism, noted earlier in the case of Barth, is theologically deeply-rooted in the basic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. Yet the situation is much more complex than any simple antithesis between ‘justification’ and ‘mysticism’ could suggest.

The statement, for example, by Friedrich Heer: ‘The mystics’ theme is that men should look for the kingdom of God within themselves’,<sup>93</sup> could be seen as encapsulating the way in which Martin Luther’s Reformation was at one and the same time indebted to,<sup>94</sup> and yet implacably hostile to, the German tradition of mysticism. On the one hand, mysticism fostered interiority,<sup>95</sup> and

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 574. Bossuet was also, interestingly, against any supposedly selfless love of God, which mystically inclined thinkers are prone to recommend, arguing that while God may be ‘*the* highest Good’, he is ‘also *my* highest Good’ (ibid.).

<sup>92</sup> Louth, *Origins*, xii, in reference to Anne Fremantle and W.H. Auden, *The Protestant Mystics* (London, 1964) vii, quoting W.T. Stace.

<sup>93</sup> F. Heer, op. cit., 370.

<sup>94</sup> See Sidney Painter, *A History of the Middle Ages 284–1500* (London, 1973), 420f. Luther himself published an edition of the *Theologia Germanica*. It is now (a critical text was published in 1982) thought that ‘the work comes from the milieu of the Friends of God associated with Eckhart and J. Tauler, whose doctrines it reflects’ (ODCC, 1604). But Luther’s relationship with his own German religious tradition is clearly not straightforward (cf., for example, Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, New York, 1962, 189).

<sup>95</sup> It is in this interiority that many commentators have seen the root of much that is admirable and much that is disastrous in German culture. The dilemma of modern German culture, which valued inwardness over politics, was touched on by Thomas Mann in a lecture delivered to a group of republican students in Munich in 1923: ‘The finest characteristic of the typical German, the best-known and also the most flattering to his self-esteem, is his inwardness . . . The inwardness, the culture (*Bildung*) of a German implies introspectiveness; an individualistic cultural conscience; consideration for the careful tending, the shaping, deepening and perfecting of one’s own personality or, in religious terms, for the salvation and justification of one’s own life; subjectivism in the things of the mind, therefore, a type of culture that might be called pietistic, given

Luther was nothing if not a man with a volcanic inner life; and the German mystical tradition fostered the German vernacular too, and this was to be the instrument of Luther's great liberating and awesome influence.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, the Reformers stressed the idea of justification by faith alone. Hence, mystical talk of human transformation, to say nothing of union with God, they could not but regard as profoundly suspect.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, even Tauler's attack on the externals of religion – 'Churches make no man holy, but men make churches holy'<sup>98</sup> – was still miles away from Luther's sense of man's utter sinfulness and radical need of justification from a transcendent, all holy, and gracious God. And indeed, 'Protestant theologians, from M. Luther onwards, have tended to regard mysticism with suspicion. E. Brunner and R. Niebuhr held it to be anti-Christian because of its close link with Neoplatonism, which seemed to bring it closer to pagan gnosis than to the Gospel's offer of salvation; others feared dangers of pantheism.'<sup>99</sup>

Harvey Egan, a prominent Catholic writer on mysticism, makes the same point: 'For those influenced by the Continental-European Protestant theologians, such as Ritschl, Troeltsch, Nygren, von Harnack, Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann, mysticism means little more than Greek-infested, heretical Christianity.'<sup>100</sup> The same writer makes similar observations in his *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, with reference to theologians in the Protestant tradition:

Influential theologians, including Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Friedrich Heiler, Albrecht Ritschl, Nathan Söderblom, Ernst Troeltsch, and Adolf Harnack, . . . sharply distinguish biblical, prophetic religions from Oriental mystical religions, claiming that the two are mutually exclusive. Moreover, these authors reject the longstanding Christian mystical tradition as a pagan, neo-Platonic infection and deformation of Christianity, or as Roman Catholic piety in an extreme form.

Consequently:

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to autobiographical confession and deeply personal, one in which the world of the *objective*, the political world, is felt to be profane and is thrust aside with indifference, "because", as Luther says, "this external order is of no consequence" (quoted by W.H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, Cambridge, 1975, vii). It would seem that the source of this problem lies further back than Luther, in the medieval German mystical tradition itself (see below, n.110).

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Erikson, op. cit., 195.

<sup>97</sup> Louth, 'Mystik II', 571.

<sup>98</sup> From a sermon preached at the consecration of Cologne Cathedral in 1357, in which he took as his theme that 'the true consecration of churches . . . was a rite to be celebrated within "the inward-turning man"' (see Heer, op. cit., 371).

<sup>99</sup> *ODCC*, 1127.

<sup>100</sup> H. Egan, S.J., *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?* (New York/Ramsey, 1982), 1.

From this perspective, Christian mysticism is a contradiction in terms. According to these thinkers, genuine Christian faith should reject mysticism as a ‘work,’ ‘law,’ or ‘religion’ in the most pejorative sense. Barth typifies this view when he considers mysticism as more pernicious than even self-righteous Pharisaism . . .

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Barth himself deals, somewhat provocatively, with ‘mysticism’ as a form of ‘Religion as Unbelief’ (‘atheism’ falls under the same rubric), in *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2.<sup>102</sup> He interprets mysticism as really not opposed to the established religions it is often seen as attacking, since all such religions are, for Barth, in fact the offspring of mystical impulses. Yet he does, perhaps paradoxically, also have a strong sense of the ‘mystery’ of Christianity, in tune with his insistence on divine transcendence, but seems to fear that this mystery would be dissolved or illegitimately appropriated by any move in the direction of ‘mysticism’. He writes, for instance, in *Church Dogmatics*: ‘*Mysterium* signifies not simply the hiddenness of God, but rather His becoming manifest in a hidden, i.e. in a non-apparent way, which gives information not directly but indirectly. *Mysterium* is the veiling of God in which He meets us by actually unveiling Himself to us: because He will not and cannot unveil Himself to us in any other way than by veiling Himself.’<sup>103</sup> This view of the divine *mysterium* of Christianity seems to preserve the traditional emphasis upon the incomprehensibility or hiddenness of God, even – indeed perhaps especially – in his revelation, and to be in fact not essentially out of harmony with an important aspect of the ‘mysticism’ of the Fathers.

### *Concluding observations*

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<sup>101</sup> Collegeville, Minn., 1991, XXV. It might be worth noting in passing a difference between the original German and the English translation of the Barth reference Egan gives at this point (to the ‘excluding’ of mysticism). The reference in question is to *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, 109-110). The English version reads as if mysticism has to be repudiated by genuine believers themselves, whereas what the German version (*Der Römerbrief*, Zürich, 1976 [1940], 84) actually claims is that mysticism – for Barth a form of fake Pharisaic humility – will at the heel of the hunt ensure that its practitioners themselves will be “‘turned away” from the gates of the righteousness of God’. The veiled threat – or at least the hint about the ‘danger’ of ‘mysticism’ – implied in Barth’s assertion is lost in the translation.

<sup>102</sup> *C.D.*, I, 2, 318–325.

<sup>103</sup> *C.D.*, I, 1, 188 (quoted by Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, London, 1967, 51).

In outlining briefly the history of Christian mysticism, attention was drawn to the difference perceived between patristic and all subsequent mysticism. Mysticism in the early period was said to be ‘objective’, but since the medieval period, to have become more involved with ‘human experience’. This tendency was seen to have gathered momentum since the Enlightenment, with mysticism becoming increasingly subjective. We now must look a little more closely at whether this broad picture is entirely fair.

While it may indeed be plausible to claim that the earlier form of mysticism is objective and concerned with our approach to, and participation in, the objective mystery of redemption in Christ, nevertheless, even this ‘objective’ mysticism, if it is to claim legitimately the title of Christian, surely has to be able to answer the suspicion<sup>104</sup> that it was one strategy that early Christians adopted in order to try to overcome the difficulty created by the absence, or at least delay, of the parousia.

When Christianity encountered ‘mystical’ Platonism, its expectation of the parousia – or the ‘Second Coming’, the return of Christ in glory, bringing history to an end – had not yet been realised.<sup>105</sup> It is tempting to wonder whether a mystical Platonism may, in fact, have pointed Christian thinkers towards a way forward out of the embarrassment of the (albeit only temporary) non-fulfilment of their hope. By concentrating on the ‘mystical’ approach to Christian faith, the Fathers found not exactly a substitute for, but an attractive complement, as it were, to the parousia, which did no longer then have to be thought of as immediately imminent. Furthermore, if one thinks of the situation in the fourth century, when Christianity ceased to be persecuted and began to enjoy state protection, when the fervour of early days seemed lost or waning, then an intensely lived mystical form of Christianity may well have seemed a credible way of asserting its otherworldly identity.

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<sup>104</sup> Suggested, to this writer, by the writings of Franz Overbeck (1837–1905).

<sup>105</sup> Balthasar explains the non-occurrence of the parousia as a ‘misunderstanding’ on the part of Christ’s earliest followers: ‘[T]he unique event of Christ, who in his earthly existence lives in anticipation of an end of time (for he bears the sin of the world, also of future generations), is in his call to discipleship opened up to other men. They receive a share in his anticipation of and in his responsibility for the future (the first disciples’ chronological expectation of an early end was a misunderstanding [*die chronologische Naherwartung der ersten Jünger war ein Mißverständnis*]); they no longer confront this future merely as the abyss of empty possibility or as something utopian and impossible’ (*Elucidations*, tr. J. Riches, London, 1975, 54f. [= *Klarstellungen*, Einsiedeln, 1978, 57]).

This suggestion may be somewhat strengthened, if one recalls that other means were also adopted by the early Church to keep its otherworldly ideals alive, some of which intersected with mysticism. One such other strategy – or, perhaps more accurately, another aspect of the same strategy – could be seen in the abandonment of interest in the world (cf. the *de contemptu mundi* theme, that was to have such a long and distinguished career in Christian tradition) and corresponding concentration on the reality of death, a path pioneered by the first monks.<sup>106</sup> Even the Pelagian movement that began in St Augustine’s time can perhaps be seen as another way of trying to prevent Christianity from being swallowed up by a state-protected, domesticated Church, ravaged by a dismal, soul-destroying worldliness.

If this is in fact so, it would seem to have set a pattern for Christian history. For whenever Christianity has been in trouble (and when is it not in trouble in this world?) it has been forced to try find new ways – such as renewing belief in an imminent end of the present world order<sup>107</sup> – of making dramatic or ‘felt’ contact with God, so to speak, in order to avoid disappearance. ‘Mysticism’ would then seem to be one of the more enduring means of trying to achieve this purpose.

If, to repeat, the hunch is correct that mysticism appears, or at least interest in mysticism seems to increase, when Christianity is in difficulties, then it might be argued that the mysticism of, say, a Bernard of Clairvaux was an instinctive, defensive response to the emergence of a more rational theology, represented by Abelard (1079–1142/3). For such a theology threatened to drive a potentially lethal wedge between ‘dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and “spirituality”’, to quote Thomas Merton.<sup>108</sup> This was a separation not existing seemingly in the patristic period, but destined to widen throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond. The Fathers, of course, one might add, did not have Islam to contend with, whereas for the medieval scholastics Islam was a powerfully organised, monotheistic religion complete with a prestigious philosophical theology, firmly ensconced in the Mediterranean world, and posing an obvious threat – or at the very least, an alternative – to Christianity, that could not simply be ignored.<sup>109</sup> The intellectual response to Islam may then

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<sup>106</sup> There could, of course, as was mentioned above, be overlap, as in the mysticism of the monks.

<sup>107</sup> See the vast array of evidence assembled by Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1978).

<sup>108</sup> As cited by Louth, *Origins*, xi–xii.

<sup>109</sup> The *Summa contra Gentiles* (1259–1264) of St Thomas Aquinas, for example, can, in the light of medieval Christendom’s awareness of Islam, be regarded as ‘part of the Christian intellectual reaction against Arabian intellectual culture, and especially against

itself have been perceived as threatening to bring about a potentially dangerous distortion of the Christian faith, and this in turn might have helped to prompt a 'mystical' correction or 'backlash'.

To take another example, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the desolate state of German lands, brought on by the strife between Pope and Emperor, may have produced by reaction the flowering of German mysticism associated above all with the name of Meister Eckhart.<sup>110</sup> One could continue. The rise of the great mystics of Spain's 'Golden Age' may have been a protective reaction by those who did not want their religion commandeered by the forces of the State for the latter's own self-aggrandisement. This represents a characteristic Christian move, if one may so put it, since Christianity's refusal to be identified with, or limited to, any this-worldly ambition, however glamorous it might appear, is an expression of its eschatological commitments.

Sometimes, too, mysticism can take the form of a limitless love, provoked by and seeking to triumph over seemingly limitless horror, as the only way of doing so, and in the conviction that it can do so: thus Quietism has been interpreted by Ian Sellers 'as an introverted and mystical reaction to the

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Arabian Aristotelianism' (A.C. Pegis, in Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the truth of the Catholic Faith. Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, trans., with an Intro. and Notes, by Anton C. Pegis, New York, 1955, 21).

<sup>110</sup> Cf. the penetrating observations of Friedrich Heer: 'The mysticism of Meister Eckhart, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Tauler and Suso, was the answer of inspired and devout men and women to the spiritual destitution which threatened with the collapse of Empire and Church. . . . The great age of German mysticism . . . ran parallel with the decline of the Empire and were a function of it. The years of the Interregnum, 1256–73, "the terrible years without an Emperor", coincided with the youth of Meister Eckhart' (op. cit., 366). What was heavy with consequences for the future development of Germany, it might be worth noting in passing, according to Heer's analysis, is the fact that, 'the response of the Germans to the political and ecclesiastical miseries of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was very different from that of the great Florentine [Dante] and of the men around Wyclif and Hus, all of whom attacked the problem from the outside, in the context of the political and ecclesiastical life of their countries. German mysticism was entirely inward, a delving into the "inner kingdom"; the mystics' all-in-all was a cosmos which was an inner kingdom of the soul' (ibid., 367). The eventual response by the authorities to the movement thus started was 'the attempt to exterminate German mysticism and all its offshoots' (371). But 'German mysticism, although driven underground, yet remained fertile; there sprang from it German poetry and song, both secular and religious, German philosophy and speculation. This is a literature of the "resistance", resistance to the ghost of the Holy Empire, to its heir the sovereign state, and to their allies, the official Church and the official faith. The flaw which separates the outer from the inner kingdom, power from spirit, . . . politicians from intellectuals, and which has been so tragic in its effects on German history, had here its point of origin' (371). See also above, n.95.

dogmatism and oppressions of the Thirty Years' War'.<sup>111</sup> And at roughly the same time, in Germany, Quietism encouraged the emergence of 'Pietism', a movement that attempted to resist the deadening effect of a rigid, over-institutionalised Lutheran orthodoxy.

At a later stage, as we saw, the more experiential or 'mystical' approach to Christianity is dramatically exemplified by J.G. Hamann, a forerunner of the Romantics, and one of the first to attack the shortcomings of the Enlightenment. Following on from such rumblings of discontent with the *Aufklärung*, Schleiermacher, sometimes classified as a mystical thinker,<sup>112</sup> inaugurated a new epoch of theological apologetics by stressing the experiential truth of religion, thus attempting to rescue Christianity from obliteration by Enlightenment rationalism. The use of mysticism as an apologetic weapon against "the prevalent arid rationalism and materialism"<sup>113</sup> can also be observed in Catholic writers over the past hundred years.

To sum up, if 'mysticism' can in fact plausibly be interpreted as a reactive tendency in the history of Christianity (like prophecy in the history of Israel?), if it can be understood as a compelling and resourceful means of coping with varying situations of crisis, is it then possibly, at heart, a subterfuge? Is it, in short, an attempt to escape from an intolerable world, somehow to transcend history in the here and now, which all religions in one way or another wish to do, and thus paradoxically to make life endurable?<sup>114</sup> And furthermore, just as an acute awareness of death, and an abandonment of earthly ambitions or even interests, can be found in many religions and world views, so 'mysticism' can be found in many places outside Christianity. There is, it could be argued, nothing specifically Christian about it, except perhaps in its patristic phase, when it might still conceivably be seen as an inspired and creative attempt to find a new way of keeping Christian faith alive in the face of the failure – in the short run, at any rate – of Christ's parousia to materialise. Or, if one were to see the early Church itself as arising in response to the non-occurrence of the parousia, then

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<sup>111</sup> Art. 'Quietism' in J.D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Exeter, 1974), 818.

<sup>112</sup> He is included, for instance, in John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions*, (London, 1976), 164f.

<sup>113</sup> David Knowles, *What is Mysticism?* (London, 1976), 11.

<sup>114</sup> The language of these remarks was suggested by an observation the great classical scholar E. R. Dodds made in his autobiography, *Missing Persons* (Oxford, 1977). On visiting Mount Athos in 1951 he was struck by the appearance of gradual disintegration the monasteries presented by that time, and remarked: 'One day, I could not but feel, Athos must perish, and with it one more experiment in the art of enduring life' (op. cit., 185).

mysticism could perhaps be seen as a profound attempt to re-christianise the Church, as it were, or to transcend it, through the search for immediate contact with God.<sup>115</sup> On this interpretation, the motivation or inspiration of subsequent, and especially modern, Western mysticism would of course be less focused, less specific, more diffuse. As against this line of argument, defenders of the legitimacy of Christian mysticism often point out that, over and over again, it is the practical life of charity and virtue (surely a quintessentially Christian concern) that is stressed as indispensable, as certainly more important ultimately than any extraordinary ‘interior’ experiences, by the most sublime of the mystics.<sup>116</sup> The latter do not typically seek some frantic compensation for frustrated eschatological hopes or some escape from the world in the security of vivid ‘religious experience’, but rather desire to live out practically the divine life of charity in the world in which they find themselves.

But it is still always important to remember that mysticism is not unique to Christianity. And indeed in Christianity, as elsewhere, it seems to have the note of ‘immediacy’ about it, which Andrew Louth considers to be central to all mysticism: ‘[Mysticism] can be characterized as a search for and experience of immediacy with God. The mystic is not content to know *about* God, he longs for union with God. . . . [T]he search for God, or the ultimate, for His own sake, and an unwillingness to be satisfied with anything less than Him; the search for

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<sup>115</sup> The problem of maintaining the vigour and purity of Christian faith against the pressures of historical reality is, of course, as old as Christianity itself. Kolakowski’s sobering assessment of the (inevitable?) compromises demanded of religious idealism by human, all too human reality, is worth noting. With reference to Kolakowski’s book: *Chrétiens sans Église* (Religious Consciousness and Church Structure, Studies on Nondenominational Christianity of the Seventeenth Century, 1965) Czeslaw Milosz writes: ‘This is an investigation, unique in its thoroughness, of mystical currents in Holland and France, with an awesome array of footnotes. The author’s conclusions may be stated as follows: Religious movements, as they gather strength, are confronted at a given moment with a choice; they can either organize themselves as churches, impose orthodoxy upon their members, and betray their initial, genuine impetus or try to preserve their original purity, but then the price is disintegration and disappearance’ (C. Milosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983, 518). In the light of such a judgement, could it be argued that Christian ‘mysticism’ is a frequently occurring and ingenious attempt one finds in the history of the Church to square the religious circle, i.e. to recover the ‘original purity’, without provoking ‘disintegration and disappearance’?

<sup>116</sup> As in the case, for instance, of Teresa of Ávila (cf. Louth, ‘Mystik II’, 572), whose emphasis on ‘God’s desire to be present with the creation’ (Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 158) is of a piece with this outlook. Cf. also the article ‘Liebe’ in P. Dinzelsbacher (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Mystik* (Stuttgart, 1998), 323ff.

immediacy with this object of the soul's longing: this would seem to be the heart of mysticism.'<sup>117</sup>

Yet the fact that mysticism may be a response to a religious crisis, that it is found beyond the frontiers of Christendom, that it comes in many varieties—none of this should be taken to imply that it will *not* bring followers of the Christian faith into contact with God. But it does suggest that what is uniquely Christian is not identifiable, without remainder, with mysticism. In short, even Christian mysticism must recognise that the End is not yet, that the parousia has not yet happened, that the gap between what we are and what we are to be still remains unbridged. Mysticism, in other words, does not have to be rejected as anti-Christian or alien to Christianity, but neither can it be taken as 'the essence of Christianity'.

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<sup>117</sup> *Origins*, xv.