There is no universally agreed-upon definition of mysticism, any more than there is for religion. In common parlance, the word is often taken to refer to anything that is strange or mysterious. More narrowly, it can be understood to indicate the quest to attain union with God. Here I will refer to those elements in Christian belief and practice that concern the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effects attendant upon a heightened awareness of God's immediate and transforming presence. Since the legitimacy of the term mysticism, which first appeared in the seventeenth century, has been questioned. While the word is modern, the use of mystical as a qualifier for elements in Christian practice and thought is old. The Greek adjective, a superlative meaning to indicate the knowledge or better understanding, has been used to denote the mystic in the sense in which Origen of Alexandria in the third century, or Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth, wrote. As mystical theologians.

Mysticism

I. The Nature of Mysticism

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2. The development of explicit forms of mysticism

A. Monastic mysticism

The historical evolution of explicit forms of Christian mysticism can be portrayed according to a model of gradually accumulating and interactive layers of tradition. In that sense, mysticism again emerges as one element in the broader Christian dynamic of handing on the faith. Mystics embark upon their pursuit of God within the community of belief and worship on the basis of studying the biblical text, participating in the Church's liturgical and sacramental life, and reading the classics of the mystical tradition.

The first and foundational layer of the Christian mystical tradition began in the third century in the writings of the great exegete and catechist, Origen (d. 254). Although Origen's predecessor Clement of Alexandria had already introduced the use of elements of Greek philosophical mysticism in the service of Christian teaching, especially the notions of contemplation of God and divinization, it was Origen's biblically based programme of the soul's purification from vices through loving devotion to the Word made flesh that set forth the first full exposition of Christian mysticism. According to Origen, the anagogic, or uplifting, interpretation of the Scriptures, especially the Song of Songs, enables the devout believer to attain divinizing union with God. Many of the major themes of subsequent Christian mysticism (e.g. the role of love and knowledge, the relation of action and contemplation, union as a loving union of wills) found their first full presentation in Origen's writings.

The importance of Origen's biblical mysticism stems not only from his own writings, but also from the fact that Origenist mysticism was taken up in the fourth and fifth centuries by monastics to help hand on the wisdom of the desert. The monastic practice of flight from the world in order to undertake a specialized life of prayer and penance, either as a solitary (the eremitical way) or in community (the coenobitical way), became the institutional matrix for most forms of mysticism down to the twelfth century. Monastic mysticism was essentially biblical and liturgical in the sense that the monastics sought God in and through personal appropriation of the spiritual meaning of Scripture cultivated within the liturgical life of the monastic community. Monastic mystics rarely talked about their own experience of God; they rather sought to express the path to mystical transformation through biblical exegesis and treatises of a mystagogical character (i.e., designed to guide readers into the consciousness of God's presence).

Crucial figures in the formation of monastic mysticism were Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) in the East, and John Cassian (d. 435) in the West. To be sure, Origenism was not the whole story of the first layer in the development of mysticism. The great Fathers of the undivided Church who helped establish the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and Christology also made significant contributions to the development of the monastic mysticism that was to remain dominant down to the end of the twelfth century. In the East, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395) showed how divine infinity attracted believers to endless loving pursuit (epektasis) of God, both in this life and in the next. In the West, Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) was instrumental in conveying the Greek erotic mysticism of the Song of Songs to Latin readers. Above all, it was Augustine of
Hippo (d. 430) who shaped mysticism in the medieval West. The Bishop of Hippo's accounts of his ascents to brief touching of God in the Confessions, and especially his preaching on the mystical dimensions of the Psalms, are classic mystical texts that retain their power even today. His teaching on the immanence of the Trinity in the soul, the necessary mediation of the total Christ, Head and members, in finding God, as well as his analysis of the various kinds of visionary experience, provided doctrinal foundation for many forms of later mysticism. At the end of the ancient world, Gregory the Great (d. 604), the first monastic pope, synthesized mystical teaching under the themes of compunction and contemplation.

Among the most influential of the early mystics was the mysterious Dionysius, probably a Syrian monk of c. 500. His writings sketched a programme of ascent to God through the necessary, but insufficient, use of symbols, rites and positive assertions about God designed to lead on to the negative theology that strips all predications from God and prepares for the mystical theology in which the soul, following the example of Moses, finds God in the darkness of unknowing. Dionysius’ form of Christian Neoplatonic mysticism was introduced into the West in the ninth century through the translations of John Scotus Eriugena. This Irish scholar developed his own systematic form of Christian Neoplatonism with a strong mystical flavour in his masterwork, the Periphyseon (On the Division of Nature).

The twelfth century saw both the summation of monastic mysticism, especially in the writings of the Cistercian and Victorine mystics, and the appearance of elements hinting at important shifts in mysticism that were to become evident after the year 1200. The growth of first-person accounts of visionary experiences of Christ fore-shadowed the explosion of visionary mysticism in the later Middle Ages. The greatest mystic of the era, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), brought the erotic mysticism based on the Song of Songs to new heights. Bernard also stressed the need for personal experience as a criterion to be co-ordinated with that of the biblical witness. The proper balance between what Bernard called ‘the book of experience’ and the book of the Bible was to remain an issue for centuries. The major Victorine mystics, especially Hugh (d. 1141) and Richard (d. 1173), witness to the desire to systematize traditional teaching on prayer, contemplation and ecstatic experience, showing the importance of mysticism in the Scholastic theology.

B. The new mysticism

At the beginning of the thirteenth century new forms of religious life encouraged innovative ways of describing close encounters with God. The mendicant orders of Franciscans and Dominicans and independent forms of religious life such as that of the Beguines provided impetus for the new mysticism of the late Middle Ages. Although this mysticism built on the riches of the monastic contemplative tradition, it was novel in its break with the monks’ stress on flight from the world and in its message that mystical contact with God was accessible to all Christians. The new mysticism was also not limited to the learned Latin tongue, but was most often expressed in the developing vernaculars of Western Europe. The new mysticism invited the participation of women in a powerful way. Many of the late medieval women mystics
wrote in the vernacular, making use of language that often seemed excessive in relation to previous mysticism, especially in their appeal to sexual imagery and their claims to have attained complete identity with God.

Of course, generalizations about women mystics are no more true than those about male mystics. What is most impressive is sheer number of important women mystics evident from the thirteenth century on. In Germany we find the Beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282), the Cistercian nuns of Helfta in Saxony, and a number of fourteenth-century Dominican nuns. In Italy, Clare of Assisi (d. 1253), Angela of Foligno (d. 1309), and Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) are the most famous of a host of ecstatic and visionary women. The Dutch-speaking areas provided the Cistercian Beatrice of Nazareth and the Beguine Hadewijch in the thirteenth century, as well as a number of lesser-known women in the centuries that followed. In France another Beguine, Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), was executed for dangerous ideas found in her mystical treatise The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls. In England the Showings of the anchoress Julian of Norwich (d. c. 1420) remains one of the most popular of all mystical texts.

The new mysticism was not just the province of women. The period between 1200 and 1500 saw some of the greatest male mystics of the Christian tradition. The writings of Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), like the Bible, are mystical in an implicit more than in an explicit sense, but due to his reception of the stigmata, Francis became an image of the ideal mystic. The works of Bonaventure (d. 1274), the premier mystical theologian of the Franciscan tradition, were instrumental in this process. The Seraphic Doctor brought the systematic impetus of the Victorines to a new level – an organized mystical theology that was given a new orientation through the image of Francis as the perfect imitatio Christi.

No less significant was the 'mysticism of the ground' created by the German Dominican, Meister Eckhart (d. 1328). Eckhart preached that 'God's ground is the soul's ground and the soul's ground is God's ground', pointing to the deep inner identity with God that could be reached through the new awareness found in total detachment. Aspects of his daring message were deemed theologically unacceptable by Pope John XXII who condemned twenty-eight extracts from his writing and preaching. Eckhart's followers, particularly Henry Suso and John Tauler, remained true to his memory, though they sought to qualify some of the more daring aspects of the mysticism of the ground. Other fourteenth-century mystics, especially the Dutch John Ruusbroec (d. 1381), worked out a form of mysticism close to that of Eckhart, but more careful of doctrinal limits. The fourteenth century also witnessed significant mystical texts in English produced by Richard Rolle (d. 1349), the Augustinian Walter Hilton (d. 1396), and the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing and its related treatises (c. 1380s).

Debates over the differences between true and false mysticism pervaded the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At the root of the dispute was the new conception of mystical union that had emerged in the thirteenth century and how this concept was thought to affect the relation between the mystic and the institutional Church. The traditional monastic view of union centred on the loving uniting of the divine and human wills often expressed through an appeal to the erotic intercourse of lovers in the Song of Songs. It insisted on the continuing distinction of the two subjects, taking
its motto from the Pauline text, 'The one who adheres to God becomes one spirit' (1 Cor. 6.17). Beginning with some of the thirteenth-century women, such as Hadewijch and Marguerite Porete, and developed in Eckhart's mysticism of the ground, a new concept of union of identity was created according to which God and human, at least in some way, become absolutely one in a bottomless abyss of mutual-ity and equality. Proponents of this form of union of identity or indistinction also appealed to biblical texts, such as Christ's prayer, 'That they all may be one, even as You, Father, are in me, and I am in You' (John 17.21). But if mystics came to see themselves as identical with God, what did this mean for their relationship to the Church? Were they no longer bound to the ecclesiastical authority and the sacramental life? Were they perhaps even above the moral law? Accusations that some mystics had reached such conclusions and adopted a life of 'freedom of the spirit' (2 Cor. 3.17) were to trouble Western Christianity for centuries.

C. The crisis of mysticism

The sixteenth century created little that was new in the story of Western mysticism, but many of the trends and issues that first emerged about 1200 reached fruition at this time. The fragmentation of Christendom in the Reformation debates also had a profound effect on mysticism. Neither Martin Luther nor John Calvin were mystics in the classic sense, but both Reformation leaders used elements of the mystical tradition in their theologies, so that later Protestant mystics, such as John Arndt (d. 1621), and even the theosophically inspired Jacob Boehme (d. 1624), could claim to be reviving aspects of Reformation theology that had been neglected. The Pietist movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continued the line of Lutheran Protestant mysticism.

Other churches and groups that had broken with Rome in the sixteenth century also produced their own forms of mysticism. The radical spiritual reformers of the sixteenth century, who went further than Luther and Calvin in their stress on inner religion without institution, absorbed elements of late medieval mysticism, especially the stress on detachment and inner identity with God found in the mysticism of the ground, but they did so within an ethical and individualistic framework that was post-medieval, as can be seen in the writings of Valentin Weigel (d. 1588), who lived as a Lutheran pastor while keeping his true sympathies hidden. In the mainstream Church of England a rich vein of mystical prose and especially poetry emerged in the seventeenth century with such figures as George Herbert (d. 1633) and Thomas Traherne (d. 1674). Coming out of the Calvinist reformed tradition, the seventeenth-century English Puritans also composed mystical poetry and prose treatises.

The major forms of mysticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not surprisingly found in Catholic Europe. Female mystics continued to appear in Italy (e.g. Catherine of Genoa, Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi), but it was in sixteenth-century Spain that early modern mysticism reached its first peak. The suspicions of mysticism evident in the late Middle Ages were revived in Spain beginning in the 1520s when the Alumbrados (illuminated ones) were accused of many of the same errors as the medieval Free Spirits. But the atmosphere of suspicion and repression did not snuff
out the extraordinary mystical fervour that was nurtured by new forms of religious life and the reform of older orders. Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556), the founder of the Jesuits, was a perfect representative of the mystical ideal of simul in contemplatione activus (i.e., being at once active and contemplative). Although some later Jesuits continued to follow the mystical path, the leadership of the order turned against mystical prayer. The greatest Spanish mystics were nurtured by the reform of the Carmelite order. Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), the initiator of the reform, wrote two of the most important mystical classics, an autobiographical Life and a treatise called The Interior Castle. Her confessor and assistant, John of the Cross (d. 1591), was not only a premier mystical poet, but the author of a four-volume commentary on his poems that forms one great treatise on the negative and positive aspects of the path to mystical union with the Trinity.

The seventeenth century marked a watershed, the era when the ongoing disputes over the nature and legitimacy of mysticism reached a crisis that was partly internal and partly external. Internally, the trajectory stressing the role of inner experience in accounts of mysticism finally seemed to implode as the concentration on the investigation of inner states, especially of rapture and union, became so dominant that it ruptured the connection between the mystical element and the broad context of Christian life. Mystics seemed to some observers, both then and now, to be creating a separate sphere of religion. The emergence of the category of 'mysticism' (first found in France as 'la mystique') has been seen as a sign of this shift. The internal crisis was exacerbated externally by the Enlightenment criticism of traditional forms of Christian belief and practice, something which helped undercut the world view that had nourished mysticism over the centuries.

During the seventeenth century the major arena of mysticism shifted to France. The Golden Age of French mysticism included such figures as Francis de Sales (d. 1622), Pierre Cardinal Bérulle (d. 1629), and the Ursuline missionary to Canada, Marie de l'Incarnation (d. 1672). Important French mystics were also involved in the Quietist controversy at the end of the century. In 1687 a Spanish priest resident in Rome, Miguel de Molinos, was condemned to perpetual imprisonment for mystical errors characterized as Quietism (i.e., belief in a state of inner passivity so extreme that one could no longer be troubled to perform good works or to avoid evil ones). In the 1690s similar errors were ascribed to Madame Guyon (d. 1717), a prolific mystical author whose writings are reminiscent of some of the more excessive medieval female mystics. Guyon was defended by Archbishop Fénelon (d. 1715), who saw in her a classic mystic who based her life on pure love of God. Fénelon's defence, however, was singled out for condemnation (albeit a mild one) by Pope Innocent XII in 1699.

The effect of these internal and external blows marginalized mysticism in much of Western Europe. This is not to say that mysticism totally died out after 1700. Indeed, in Russia, well removed from the enlightened West, mystical currents continued to flourish and reached new heights in the late eighteenth and in the nineteenth centuries. In Protestant lands mysticism found a place among the Free Church traditions nourished both by the Radical Reformers and (strangely enough) the Catholic Quietists. In Catholicism, for several centuries mysticism tended to be reduced to paranormal experiences of rapture, stigmata and inedia (living without food) found among uneducated women carefully supervised by clerical handlers. Even in the first
half of the twentieth century mysticism was generally viewed either psychologically, as an example of aberrant psychic states, or as a suspect phenomenon to be measured by guidelines set down according to a few respected mystics, notably Teresa and John of the Cross.

The significance of mysticism as an integral aspect of Christian life and practice, however, did re-emerge during the course of the twentieth century, both through the writings and witness of modern mystics (e.g., Teilhard de Chardin, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton), and through the investigations of theologians, philosophers and other scholars of religion. Recognition of the power of mysticism to transform not only individual consciousness, but also social and institutional structures, contributed to this renewed appreciation of the necessity of the mystical element in Christianity. The full story of this revival remains to be written, but we can agree with Karl Rahner who said that the Christian of the future will be either a mystic – or will not be a Christian at all.