AFFECTIVE PIETY AND PENTECOSTAL EVANGELISM:
EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGY AND THE BOOK OF
MARGERY KEMPE

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Several times interrogated for Lollardy, yet endorsed by Archbishop Arundel himself, Margery Kempe has been variously labelled a heretic, hysterical, religious enthusiast, would-be mystic, and anointed visionary. As these many labels suggest, The Book of Margery Kempe narrates a spiritual experience that is a unique blend of affective piety and transgressive behavior, a peculiar threat to established orthodoxy. As Nicholas Watson attests, it is “not easy to come at the logic which binds Kempe’s ideas and experiences together; especially if, like the second scribe, we try to align her with the theological systems of her contemporaries” (“The Making” 416). He describes the aspects of her behavior that resonate with those of other saints or traditions, and concludes that “[d]espite all medieval and modern effort to find parallels, her crying aligns her with nobody,” and that she could easily be “seen as a chameleon saint: a little bit of this and a little bit of that” (416).

Like many of her critics throughout her Book, Kempe or “this creature,” as the text calls her, is preoccupied with her sense of uniqueness and the need to justify her behavior. Indeed, her own anxiety when attempting to understand and articulate her “felyngys” far surpasses that of her critics; at times she agonizes over their origin, wondering if her visions are from Christ or the devil, and at other times she simply dreads them: “sche wulde that hir hed had be smet fro the body, tyl God of hys goodnesse declaryd

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hem to hir mende.... And the drede that sche had of hir felyngys was the grettest scorge that sche had in erde” (384). Throughout the text she vacillates between contagious self-doubt and brash self-confidence: on the one hand, obsessively seeking clerical endorsement and adhering to conventions of discretio spirituum, while on the other, challenging authority by correcting or rebuking her superiors and engaging in transgressive behavior, such as disobeying her clercis, traveling and preaching. Her critics have often seen this vacillation as evidence that Kempe was an insecure, hysterical, and overly emotional person ill-equipped to deal with mystical phenomena, or a marginalized woman trying to negotiate for power in a religious patriarchal society. Felicity Riddel, for example, depicts Kempe’s outbursts as roars of repressed female rage, her means of dissenting against the cultural definitions and limitations placed on her (448). In recent years, critics have insightfully aligned Kempe with the continental Beguine movement, observing that she shares many of their characteristics, and that her extensive traveling on the continent may have exposed her to this tradition; many of Kempe’s contemporaries deemed her a Lollard. In her book God’s Words, Women’s Voices, Rosalynn Voaden suggests that it is Kempe’s interpretation of her calling (ch. 5) that is to blame for her controversial lifestyle and poor reception. She claims that Kempe’s vision narrative paradoxically constructs Kempe as a holy woman by containing “both those elements which authorize Margery as a visionary and those elements which subvert that authority” (117). Consider this lengthy passage in which Voaden describes the contradictory impulses of Kempe’s calling:

In the particular enactment of a holy life to which Margery is represented as being called, she is to be the intimate and instrument of the divine as well as despised and rejected of men. Here is an inherently unstable interpretation of her calling which doom her to a life on the mystical margin. Being offered as an object of scorn and abuse undermines the construction of her as a visionary. To elicit abuse she must be nonconforming, suspect, outcast; yet to be credible as a visionary she must conform to the doctrine of discretio spirituum, be beyond suspicion, be obedient to the power of the church. Margery is caught in conflicting discourses—the discourse of discretio spirituum and the discourse of renunciation. The text consists of continual negotiation of the conflict—negotiation which never achieves resolution. (117, emphasis mine)

Voaden contends that in order to conform to discretio spirituum, women visionaries had to “privilege the voice of God by disembodying the visionary” and that Kempe’s Book, “attempting to reconcile conflicting discourses,...fails to achieve this effect” (119), since the “vanishing visionary cannot also be the object of everyone’s attention, laid bare to the wondering gaze of all eyes” (121). As Voaden points out, Kempe does not vanish—she is “insistently there; she is often unwelcome, unwanted and inappropriate,...the woman
who will not go away” (121).

My aim in this paper is not to defend Kempe and prove her worthy of her place in the canon as one of the “Middle English mystics.” Nor am I striving to reinvent Kempe as a proto-Pentecostal in an effort to explain her demonstrative spirituality, though Pentecostals are indeed one group with which her crying aligns her. Why, then, should we muddy the waters with an attempt to contextualize Kempe anachronistically? And why use a loaded term such as “pentecostal” (particularly in light of modern fundamentalist associations)? A brief answer: the term “pentecostal” is useful for our discussion of Kempe’s spirituality, not as a catch-all term for all that is controversial about Kempe’s behavior, but as a term for a later Christian denomination which, like Kempe’s Book, is characterized by affective mystical phenomena, an extreme impulse to evangelize, a literalist metonymic understanding of one’s relationship to God, and a particularly dogmatic temperament of piety and independence. More than similar religious experience, however, there is an historical basis for comparing Kempe and modern Pentecostals: the history of enthusiastic religion, embodied and demonstrative, spans the medieval era to the modern, and both Pentecostals and Kempe have been variously placed in this tradition.

Like Voadeen, I think Kempe’s embodied spirituality and her inability to articulate the ineffable according to the discourse of *discretio spirituum* are the main impediments to her successful reception as a visionary (157). In this paper, however, I am concerned less with Kempe’s interpretation of her vocation and the controversial results, than with the quality of Kempe’s religious experience insofar as it informs and necessitates the construction of her vocation in contradictory discourses. I want to suggest that Kempe’s inability to perform the “vanishing act” appropriate to women visionaries is a result less of her ignorance of *discretio spirituum* than of a certain type of affective, embodied spirituality which was demonstrative and evangelistic and which we know today as “pentecostal.” It is my contention that Kempe and modern Pentecostals share a similar experiential theology and that an investigation of the pentecostal hermeneutic (a blend of mysticism and literalist biblical exegesis, affect and intellect) not only sheds light on the nature of Kempe’s piety as both orthodox and transgressive, but also helps us see the way her Book interrogates late medieval models of reading by troubling the dichotomy between “intellective and affective reading, words and narrative, interpretation and devotion” (Schirmer 357).

In many ways, Kempe is a model medieval laywoman. She frequently confesses and performs bodily penance (wearing a hair shirt and fasting [I.4]), goes on several pilgrimages (I.26, II.2), aspires to live chastely (I.3), meditates on the saints and the Passion (I.5-6), and engages in extensive
probatio. 13 Twice in her Book (I.17 and 58), Kempe gives an extensive list of religious texts she has had read to her, claiming that her own feelings towards Christ far surpass any descriptions she has ever heard (I.17). 14 Throughout, Kempe takes pains to distance herself from Lollardy and prove her orthodoxy: the very first chapter of her Book demonizes the Lollard belief that one can repent without a confessor (“For sche was eyrletlyd be hyr enmy, the devel, eyrsoever seyng to hyr whyl sche was in good heele hir nedyd no confession, but don penawes be hirself alone, and all schuld be feryoyyn” [53]) and professes Margery’s belief in transubstantiation (ch. 5). She even records the approval of Archbishop Arundel himself: “And sche teld hym also the causes of hyr wpyng and the maner of dalyawns that owyr Lord dalydid to hyr sowle. And he fond no defawt therin, but aprecyd hir maner of levyng” (111). Perhaps the strongest indicator of Kempe’s orthodoxy is her piety, which Clarissa Atkinson asserts are the essential feature of her vocation and place her within the context of a long tradition of the church (Atkinson 64-66, 149-51, 155). Of them, Kempe records Julian of Norwich reassuring her: “Whan god visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, and devosyon, er compassyon, he may and owth to leyvn that the Holy Gost is in hys sowle...Ther may non evyl spiryt yeayn thes tokenys” (121).

Despite her extreme piety, however, Kempe is repeatedly accused of Lollardy and at least four times examined for heresy, events that suggest there is something unorthodox about her behavior. Voaden claims that “the reasons why Margery is accused of Lollardy are fairly obvious, and are found in those aspects of her behaviour which deviate from discreto spirituum. These include her apparent lack of submission to clerical authority, her flaunted knowledge and her persistent presence” (143). Consider the numerous ways (and this list is not exhaustive) that Kempe attracts attention: she wears white clothes (though she is not a virgin or nun), fasts from meat, is often shrouded several times a day, weeps and roars erratically and uncontrollably, rebukes those who swear, challenges clerical authority, preaches to women and men, disobeys her confessor by going on a pilgrimage in her old age, and obsessively seeks approval for her manner of life. As Voaden observes, “[n]o other medieval woman visionarymarshals so many clerics to her cause as does Margery. The sheer number of citations of clerical approval is testimony to the sense her book conveys of the precariousness of her position as a divine channel whose ways of life invites scorn and derision” (123). However, as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton observes, feelings of “compulsion, self-doubt and evangelism [were] characteristic of medieval visionary writing” (“Who Has Written” 101), and thus it may not be fair to fault Kempe for her inner turmoil and obsessive probatio, particularly considering that she was living under Arundel’s Constitutions, which attempted to limit the freedom of the
larity to own Bibles, preach, or engage in speculative theology, constraints which Kempe was possibly negotiating (Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change”).

While Kempe’s tears of compunction added to her visionary credibility, her excessive roaring definitely detracted from it. As Kerby-Fulton observes, “Whether a vision had actually occurred—the first thing a modern person would doubt—was rarely questioned in the Middle Ages, but the source of the vision was always under suspicion” (“Who Has Written” 101). Moreover, “theological orthodoxy of the vision and its adherence to established visionary conventions” and the visionary’s “mode of living, social standing, education, temperament and religious commitment” were all subject to inquiry (“Who Has Written” 101-2). Rather than reassure people of her visionary status, Kempe’s uncontrollable roarings were often thought to be of her own contriving or the result of demonic possession; indeed, even Christ (via Kempe) attests to the fearfulness of Kempe’s “gret crys and roryngys,” which were sometimes given to “makyn the pepil aferd wyth the grace that I putte in the” (Kempe 335). One of Kempe’s most severe twentieth-century critics, David Knowles, regards Kempe’s crying and roaring with disdain and sees it as invalidating her mystical status, an indicator that her spirit is not adequately prepared in purity to receive the divine:

[1]t is the imperfect human organism that receives perceptibly, but inadequately, the divine gift of the soul, and it receives it in such a way as to scale it down to its own capacity. On this view, the stronger and better prepared a soul may be, the less it perceives or adverters to what affects its natural faculties; the divine influence is there, and powerfully so, but it cannot be perceived by the mind in any expressible form. By the same token, an ‘ecstasy’ is a weakness, a failure of a soul that is not yet perfectly the part pure, the soul that is truly strong does not experience such things. (12, emphasis mine)

For Knowles, Kempe’s extreme affective response designates her as especially weak, and he expresses his chagrin that her crying and roarings (what he labels as the “undesirable elements” in her spirituality) were not controlled and eliminated by those counseling and directing her, particularly because she wished to advance in “purity of life and prayer” (149).

Although at times Kempe, too, is baffled and worried by her tears and roarings, she becomes increasingly bold and sure of her vocation as the Book progresses. Whether it is the encouragement of Julian of Norwich, the many reassurances of Christ, the eccentricity of her old age, the confidence and knowledge gained through her travels, or a boldness inspired by the Holy Spirit (or all of the above), the result is a more daring and confident Kempe who persists in the composition of her treatise despite the difficulties of finding a willing scribe. Additionally, Kempe’s belief, if somewhat
self-fulfilling, that adversity and persecution are confirmation of her visionary status instills her with confidence: "Thow schalt ben etyn and knawyn of the pepul of the world as any raton knawyth the stoklysch. Drede the nowt, dowtyr, for thow schalt have the vctory of all thin enmys. I schal yeve the grace inow to answer every clerke in the love of God" (72). Voaden observes this divine promise as one of the "chief paradoxes" of Kempe's vocation—she is to be submissive to a spiritual director, yet simultaneously promised the ability to answer them (119). It is this belief in the ability to "answer" which Pentecostals identify as "an induement of power" (that comes with speaking in "tongues") and celebrate as proof that the Holy Spirit is in control (Tavcs 334). From a pentecostal point of view, Kempe's vocation is less paradoxical: rather than link demonstrative bodily affects with a discourse of revilement at odds with discreto spirito, Pentecostals link bodily affects with a discourse of "spirit-filled" evangelism. Rather than "vanish," a pentecostal visionary should be very much present and embodied. That embodiment is integral to Kempe's religious praxis and informs her orientation to God and the world is observed by Watson, who notes that "above all else, she would not throw away the world, or the self that had grown to middle age in the world.... Her body and its history remained the locus for all her feeling and thinking, the bridge of sights between an impure world and a pure, but still perpetually longing, God" ("Making" 416).

It is this orientation to wholeness which provides a good beginning point for comparing the religious experience of Kempe and modern-day Pentecostals. Andre Drogers writes that "the kind of fragmentation that Pentecostals want to end is that of body and mind" and that "it is their belief based on experience that mind, body, and spirit become one through healing, prophecy, dreams, and visions" (33). In Pentecostalism, experience, belief, and sensory phenomena are integral parts; moreover, there is an assumption that through mystical and affective experiences, the whole person (mind, body, and spirit) has contact with and is united through the divine. A person is not required to be perfectly pure before receiving the Holy Spirit; ecstatic human response is expected, and it is not a sign of weakness or impurity. Nor, as Gerard Roelofs notes, is it thought to be humanly contrivable: "[a]ccording to those who are concerned, charismatic activity does not originate from the individual's own will or initiative, but is said to be received from God: it is something given" (219). That it is something given, otherwordly, and uncontrollable is the claim that Kempe makes repeatedly when she insists to her accusers that she cannot stop and start crying when she chooses (ch. 3). Subsequently, since Kempe recognizes her dependence on God for her tears, and believes they are a sign of his grace, she relentlessly seeks them and internalizes feelings of failure and self-doubt when
she fails to receive them:

And sythen schowe was laboured wyth temptacyons of dyspeyry as schewe was before, and was as for fro fleyng of grace as thei that nevyr felt noon. And that myght schewe not beryn, and therfor alwey schewe dyspeyry. Salve for the tyme that schewe felt grace, her labors wer so wonderful that schewe cowd evil far with hem, but evyr mornyn and sorwyn as thow God had forsakyn her. (70)

Kempe’s seeking of religious experience (and anxiety when unfulfilled) is characteristic of charismatics who, according to Reelof, “are often involved in an exchange relationship with God in which they are asking for a religious experience” (219). He observes that having had such an experience “charismatics are overwhelmed by feelings of joyful gratitude and love of God that need to be expressed,” and that “as long as participants are convinced that they are receiving responses from God, they can keep their spirits high and will continue to look for points of orientation outside themselves” (220). This behavior and response are strikingly similar to those of Kempe.

In his comprehensive history of American Pentecostals in the twentieth-century, Grant Wacker begins not by describing their theology or rituals, but by analyzing their temperament. He claims that the pentecostal outlook, “deeply ingrained and habitual,” colored their view of social reality before they could rationalize it in a “formal, speculative theology,” and that pentecostal temperament was “rather a messy thing” (19). Early pentecostal temperament, he claims, was characterized by piety, certitude, absolutism, prevailing prayer, independence, and caniness. While these traits are general to many Christian traditions, they are very much apparent in Kempe’s own spirituality. Moreover, in light of the critical attention that Kempe’s personality has aroused, it is perhaps suggestive that Pentecostals have also been studied for their unique temperament, which Wacker claims is a mixed blend of otherworldliness and an in-the-world pragmatism or “canniness,” a canniness very similar to Kempe’s own ability to negotiate ties with clerics, survive charges of heresy, and get her Book written when she decided she wanted to pursue it.

If personal temperament does indeed color and precede self-conscious rationalization, as Wacker contends, it is not improbable that similar temperaments might share similar theological interpretation and religious praxis. Throughout her Book, many of Kempe’s descriptions of the Holy Spirit and (most) of her behavior would be approved of and nurtured in a pentecostal setting. Clearly the most “pentecostal” aspect of Kempe’s spirituality is her phenomenological experience of the Holy Spirit which is indicated by various signs, particularly her ability to speak in an unknown “tongue” to her confessor (ch. 33). In pentecostal teaching the “infilling”
of the Holy Spirit is meant primarily to empower the believer to preach with boldness. Thus, it is significant to note that while Kempe receives the gift of tongues presumably to confess to her priest (an extremely orthodox and “non-pentecostal” desire), the gift of tongues nevertheless gives her an opportunity to preach: “And yet he undirstod not English that other men spokyn; thow thei spokyn the same wordys that sche spak, yet he undirstod hem not, les than sche spak hirselfe...And sithyn sche schewyed hym the secret thynge of revelacyons and of hey contemplacyons” (186). In paradigmatic pentecostal fashion, boldness follows her experiences with the Holy Spirit. Consider this example:

And why sche daled in the Passyon of owr Lord Jhesu Crist, sche herd so hedows a melodie that sche myght not hir it. Than this creature fel down as yf she had lost hir bodyly strenth and lay stytle a grete whyle, desyring to put it away, and sche myght not. Than knew sche wel be hir feyth that ther was grete joye in hevn, wher the lest point of hys wythoutryn any comparision passeth al the joye that euer myt be thowt or feld in this lyfe. She was greetly strengthyd in his feyth and wer bold to tellyn the Vykary her felyngys, which sche had he revealacyons, botthen of quyk and of deel, and of hys owyn self. (115, emphasis mine)

This tendency for affective mystical experience, “hedows” or horrible though it might be, and bold evangelism to coexist characterizes Kempe’s spirituality and that of Pentecostals. Just as Kempe falls down and cannot move, so, too, do Pentecostals. Although Kempe does not identify the Holy Spirit directly as the cause of her boldness in this situation (here she is contemplating the Passion), she repeatedly describes her inability to control herself and links these experiences with other mystical “tokens” given by the Holy Spirit. In imagery that recalls the fire and wind of Acts 2, Kempe describes a flame burning in her breast, “wonder hoot and delectably and ryth comfortably, nowt wasting but euer increysynge, of lowe...sche felt the hete brenynge in hir brest and at hir hert, as verily as a man schuld felyn the material fyer yf he put hys hand or hys finger therin,” and the sound of “helwys blowyng in hir cre” (194, 197). When Kempe responds fearfully, Christ reassures her that the wind is the sound of the Holy Ghost and the burning is the heat of the Holy Ghost and the fire of love which is purifying her sins and is evidence that the Trinity dwells in her: “And thu schalt undirstondyn be this tokyn the Holy Gost is in the, and thu wot wel where-that-evr the Holy Gost is, ther is the Fadir, and where the Fadir is, ther is the sonne, and so thu hast fully in thi sowele al the Holy Trinite” (194). Consider how the following analysis of pentecostal orientation resonates with Kempe’s spirituality:

In the case of Pentecostalism, the relation with a Trinitarian God is experienced as powerful, especially because of the emphasis on what the Holy Spirit does. Its role
in creation and on Pentecost is continued in the life of the believer. Therefore, to the Pentecostal the belief in the work of God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is the basis of a living relationship. The feeling of an overpowering and empowering presence of the Spirit is especially clear in the dramatic experiences of healing, glossolalia, prophecy, dreams, and visions that, therefore, become paradigmatic and are revived in every testimony given about them. (Drogers 46, emphasis mine)

Although Kempe does record instances of prophetic inspiration and God’s provision and protection as proof of her visionary credibility, most of her Book describes her contemplations, Christ’s words to her, and emphasizes her feeling of being overpowered by the presence of the Spirit:

Than was hir sawle so delectably fed wyth the swet dialouge of owr Lorde and so fulfilled of hys lofe, that as a drunkyn man sche turnd hir fyrst on the o syde and sitlyn on the other, wyth gret wepeynge and gret sobbyng, unmythy to kepyn hir selfe in stables for the unquenchable fryer of lofe whiche brent ful sor in hir sawle. (208)22

Kempe’s description of her mystical union with Christ, though accompanied by mystical phenomena (“sche smelt swet smellys with hir nose” and “many white thynys flying al abowe hir on every syde, as thykke in a maner as motys in the sunne” [192]), is recorded in concrete, erotic terms. For example, she speaks of lying in bed with Christ and kissing his feet (ch. 36). Her use of these “horny” images literalizes her relationship to Christ and serves not only to demystify the “spiritual-ness” of her experience, but also to portray it as somewhat normative to daily life, like any marriage relationship would be.21 This literalization and normalization of ecstatic affect is characteristic of Pentecostals. One early pentecostal envisions his experience of the Holy Spirit in similar marital terms, outlining that he “surrendered perfectly to Him and consented to Him” as a bride to her husband” (Taves 335). Wacker notes that “[t]he most radical stream within the radical evangelical tradition—the stream that gave birth to the Holy Ghost revival [the birth of modern Pentecostalism in the 1900s]—had actively encouraged ecstatic weeping, laughing, jerking, dancing, prostration and, on rare occasions, even tongues” (54). He notes the exultation of one participant in 1896 who claims that “every artery, vein, nerve, muscle, and fiber of my being is thrilling, throbbing and pulsating the fiery current,” and that “this is my daily experience” (54).

Referring to Kempe’s mystical marriage, Nicholas Watson points out that her scribe seemed to have difficulty accepting a central aspect of the Book’s presentation of her spiritual progress, reading it as a stage-by-stage ascent away from the carnal towards the spiritual, away from the ‘milk’ of Christ’s humanity towards the ‘meat’ of his divinity (“Making” 413). He contends that this is the model sustained by two texts in Kempe’s reading list (ch. 58)
“which promote the death of fleshly desire as a precondition for holy living or unions with the divine” and that this is the model he believes Kempe’s Book was written partly to combat. If this is the case, Kempe’s Book could be interpreted as a model tract for Pentecostalism, which not only does not require the purity of the soul before the infilling of the Holy Spirit, but also advocates the infilling of the Holy Spirit for evangelism rather than contemplation, a “being-in-the-world” rather than an enclosure away from it. Watson notes that for Kempe’s scribe, “the mystical marriage had finally to involve a progressive movement away from the world and her tears to be a part of that movement” (413); for Kempe (and Pentecostals), a “mystical marriage” produces an evangelical impulse which strengthens connection to the world. While these impulses may seem to compete, Watson describes how they function in harmony to create her singularity:

Kempe presents her life as following two, apparently contradictory, trajectories: towards even greater perfection on the one hand, and towards ever closer identification with the sinful world around her on the other....[S]he presents these opposing movements very much like standing still, more a matter of an intensification of her being than a progression from one state of her soul to another....[Despite] the intensity of her formal observance, she remains a secular figure, a municipal saint.... [W]hat creates her singularity is not only her status as God’s chosen vessel but also her role as a sinning Everywoman, her capacity to be bound more closely to the world than others, at the same time and in the same way as she is bound more closely to God. (“Making” 418)

Just as Kempe experiences her relationship to Christ as an intensification of the divine in her humanness rather than a progression of her soul, pentecostal leader John Wimber describes Christianity as “supernaturally natural” (qtd. in Poloma), and Margaret Poloma depicts the pentecostal worldview as “a curious blend of premordern miracles, modern technology, and postmodern mysticism in which the natural merges with the supernatural.”24 Kempe’s function as an “Everywoman” is evangelistic in that it offers intimacy with Christ for everyone that would seek it, regardless of their social or spiritual rank. As Droegers says of Pentecostalism, “this experience is, in principle, open to everyone; there is an anti-hierarchical tendency. The ministry of all believers is emphasized” (47). Kempe’s identification with the “sinful world” both in her own life (i.e. lechery and doubt) and with those around her (i.e. sinful clerics and countrymen) is also the aim of Pentecostals who (if not in practice, in theory) “view society as evil, but seek to operate in it precisely for that reason” (Droegers 36).

If the democratizing impulse of Pentecostalism is in itself anti-hierarchical, so too is its bold challenging of authority which is grounded in the believer’s firm trust that he or she has a personal relation to the divine. As
Droogers observes, “in Pentecostalism is the return of the religious initiative to people who had been denied access to the religious means of productions. The exclusive monopoly of the clergy was broken by individuals who had dreams and visions and were inspired by a dramatic religious experience. Lay believers felt part of the whole again” (35). Not only do lay believers feel “part of the whole,” they have an opportunity to claim their own priestly role. Kempe’s own challenging of clerical authority takes the form of rebuke and disobedience, and both are confirmed by the Holy Spirit: for example, when she is interrogated for Lollardy, she tells an exemplum and the cleric admits that the tale “smythyth [hym] to the hert” (256);26 When she preaches, she is given fitting words to defend herself (“I preche not, ser; I come in no pulpytt. I use but comowynceyon and good wordys” [253]);27 when she disobedys her confessor by going on a pilgrimage, she claims that she is obeying Christ who bids her to “gon in my name, Jhesu, for I am abovyn thy gostly fadyr, and I schal excusyn the’” (393) and that God’s promise to her is confirmed when she walks into a church and the priest repeats the same words that she believed God was speaking to her in her head, “Yfy God be wyth us, ho schal be ageyns us” (394). In several situations, Kempe emphasizes her priestly vocation and authority by describing how clerics respond to her in humility. For example, Genelle Gertz-Robinson describes how through Kempe’s telling of her exemplum she makes herself “a proxy for her parish priest,” essentially “ascending the stairs of the pulpit while her interrogator observes the rites of this poetic justice by dutifully pleading for her forgiveness and prayers” (467). As Voaden notes, “[t]his negotiating of authority imparts, throughout the Book of Margery Kempe, a strong sense of agency. Margery is presented as instrumental in establishing her own authority. She mediates not only with priests and laypeople but also with Christ. She is rarely completely and unquestioningly obedient to any of the higher authorities she encounters. She is very much there; she does not go away and become a disembodied voice, as Bridget [of Sweden] does” (129).28

The personal relationship with Christ to which both Kempe and Pentecostals aspire is facilitated by a type of experiential understanding which is devotional and imaginative in nature, the type of understanding cultivated by many medieval laywomen and encouraged in their devotional reading.29 This devotional material was geared to cultivate the imagination and induce affective emotional response rather than intellectual analysis.30 As Roelofs observes, enthusiastic charismatic spirituality “results from a stance in which experiencing God is central instead of dealing with him intellectually,” and its medium of expression is one of “‘oral liturgy’ and ‘narrative theology and witness’” which “challenges the theology of the historical churches by
dismantling the privileges of abstract, rational and propositional systems” (227).\textsuperscript{31} When Kempe envisions herself interacting with Christ in gospel settings and acting out narratives, she relies on concrete language and visual imagery, both of which encourage (and are a by-product of) her literalist conception of her relationship to Christ. Her experience resonates with what Roelofs describes as typical charismatic spirituality in which charismatics experience confirmation of divine power or “signs” which “they take to refer directly to God,” thus expressing themselves in “religious language that is characterized by metonymical structure...since their language mirrors concrete and familiar things” (321).\textsuperscript{32} As Thomas Csordas observes, the “[c]ultivation of the imagination as a medium through which the deity communicates with humans in ritual healing prayer, worship, and prophetic inspiration is a distinctive feature of the Charismatic world” (190).\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps more instructive is the fact that (at times) the use of imagination is advocated especially for children; just as Kempe dramatizes scenes in which she inserts herself, charismatic children are encouraged to see “pictures in [their] head[s]” (190). That similar methods are used in both cases is thought provoking: in one case, because children are presumed to lack abstract reasoning, and in the other, to discourage abstract thought. Perhaps the type of female spirituality encouraged by the church was actually one that might work against it; Kempe’s “manner of life,” though orthodox in matters of external piety and affective devotional practice, encourages her heightened emotionality, interiority, and metonymic sensibility, which may in turn facilitate her bold interactions with Christ, her superiors, and her peers. Her very desire to be orthodox in affective piety leads her to experience and value her personal relationship to God (the assurance of God’s love through tears and her ability to hear his voice) over clerical mediation or direction.

The belief that experiential theology (personal and participatory) could lead to too much “enthusiasm,” which in turn could lead to heresy, is described by Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge in their introduction to The Chastising of God’s Children. Citing Kempe as an example of the morbid and hysterical behavior that could result when people were “deprived of the Scriptures and liturgy as spiritual and intellectual sustenance” (79) or neglected the liturgy for private devotion (54), Bazire and Colledge speculate that the Chastising author sought to protect his “simple-minded” women readers from the “less rational courses they might pursue if left to follow uncritically the example of some of the visionaries and ecstasies of their time” (78). They point out that both The Cloud and The Chastising recognize that “heresy will be distinguished by the marks of enthusiasm and that “enthusiasm” is to be discouraged as severely as heresy is to be repressed” (54).\textsuperscript{34} Since
enthusiasm is seen to be spurred by private devotion, the *Chastising* author advocates the recitation of Latin prayers (even if uncomprehended) over private meditations in the vernacular. This linking of enthusiasm, private devotion, and lack of liturgical understanding (due to simple-mindedness or neglect) is evidence of the long-standing assumption that enthusiastic experience is had by uneducated people and is therefore suspect, while also providing an example of the dichotomy between two models of late-medieval biblical reading, which worked to “create a boundary between lay and clerical interpretive communities” (Schirmer 359):

The laity are to engage the Bible imaginatively, affectively, as a structure of narratives that inspire devotion. The clergy read it intellecually, as a structure of words that provides the basis for theology and doctrine. In short, laypeople can have the narratives of the Bible—and within reasonable doctrinal limits they can do with them what they will—but they cannot have the words. (357)

Schirmer suggests that in contrast to bibliocentric Latin textual culture, Middle English religious texts were “pastorally-minded, reader-focused texts” and that “with the Bible removed as its central object, vernacular reading tends to come unmoored from texts altogether…. [inviting us] to think of the spread of literacy in late medieval England less in terms of lay access to textuality and more as an expansion and diversification of readerly strategies available to vernacular audiences” (350). While we are uncertain as to the degree of Kempe’s literacy, we know that Kempe had various religious texts read to her and that she was a member of an expanding vernacular audience which was, in Schirmer’s words, learning “to be active readers not just of texts, but of themselves as penitent sinners and potential mystics” (350). Schirmer claims that whether an individual’s act of reading is of “one’s sins or the passion [as is often the case with Kempe], the ten commandments, or the joys of heaven or the life of a saint, this kind of reading seeks always to form the reader’s own ‘outward works’ and ‘inner life’—and, especially, to create the crucial accord between the two that renders the reader herself ‘virtuously legible’” (350).

At first glance, Pentecostalism with its bibliocentric focus may seem antithetical to the reading strategies used by Kempe, and to those advocated by Middle English religious texts in general (Schirmer). However, I want to suggest that the pentecostal hermeneutic, which is perceived as being constituted by “charismatic experience” and the “illumination of the Spirit” (Stronstad 76), resonates with the practice of lectio divina and with the goal of affective response to meditations on the Passion or the saints. It is from a position of charismatic experience, akin to Kempe’s “felyngys” of being overpowering by the Holy Ghost, that the pentecostal believer works back to
interpret scripture, and by extension, themselves, their vocation, and their mission to the world. This reading strategy is, I think, very similar to that of Kempe who, motivated by her own charismatic experience, sees herself (her imitatio christi and her tears) literally as a text which she uses to not only make herself “virtuously legible” (as in Schirmer’s sense) but also to interpret and propagate. Her Book repeatedly makes clear that Kempe sees her tears as a testimony of God’s goodness, and in Susan Dickman’s words, a “mode of preaching” (174). Consider one occasion where God intimates to Kempe that “I make the to prey for thy gostly fader on this wyse: that as many men and women myth be turnyd be hys prechynge as thu woldlist that were turnyd be the teerys of thyn eyene” (Kempe 353). As Dickman observes, Kempe’s tears function evangelistically:

[I] following Caroline Bynum, we can read Margery’s Eucharistic tears as substitute for clerical experience, a challenge to the priest’s special access to God in the Mass, [we can also read her tears as challenging] the priest’s special access to the people, for Margery cried whenever the Passion was referred to in a sermon.... glossing words with her tears, providing a graphic—and exemplary—demonstration of pious behaviour: (174)

When her tears disappear, she comes to see writing her Book as a substitute for orthodox prayer:

Drede the not, dowytr, for as many bedys as thun woldist seyin, I acpte hem as thow thun seyst hem.... For, thow ye wer in the chirche and wept bothyn togethryr as sore as evry thud disse, yet schulde ye not plesyn me mor than ye don with your writing, for dowytr, be this boke many a man schal be turnyd to me and beleuy them. (379)

In this way, the writing of Kempe’s Book serves as an example of the pentecostal hermeneutic which moves from experience back to text—and in Kempe’s case, the text is not the Bible, but the narration of her life and “dalliances” with God. Both Kempe and Pentecostals demonstrate an experiential theology in which “religious experiences provide the basis for the theological language [they] employ and thus the doctrine that results” (Osborne 295). However, as Osborne posits, “language and doctrine are mutually interdependent, because our religious language is also critical in shaping our interpretation of what we experience” (295). Kempe’s language, given to her through sermons and religious texts, influences and presupposes her theology and the narrative of her Book.

Kempe’s attempt to translate her affective experience (previously perceived by Kempe as evangelistic in itself) into a “lytly treyts” that “schal treytn sunded in parcel of hys wonderful werkys” (41), requires that she negotiate different models of reading, thinking about her experience and
describing it rather than simply imagining or feeling it. Not surprisingly, her *Book* testifies to her anxiety over this intellectual transgression and we see God reassuring Margery that “whethyr thu preyst with thi mouth er thynkist with thin hert, whethyr thu redist er herist redyng, I will be plesyd with the. And yet, dowtyr, I telle the, yf thu woldyst levyn me, that thynkyn is the best for the and most schal incresyn thy lufe to me” (381, emphasis mine). Christ’s command that Kempe “thynk[c]” validates her adoption of a socially unacceptable reading strategy for laywomen, thereby challenging the dichotomy between intellective and affective reading (Schirmer 357). Though at times it privileges affective experience, the pentecostal hermeneutic is characterized by a similar negotiation of this dichotomy—its ultimate goal being an integration of the cognitive with the experiential such that “cognitive and experiential presuppositions co-exist like a marriage of equal and complementary partners” (Stronstad 71). Kempe’s assertion that the writing of her treatise induces her (and her scribe) to “holy teerys and wepyngys,” bringing with them “a flawme of fyer abowte hir brest ful hoot and delectably” (382), succinctly depicts the integration of intellective and affective “reading” characteristic of a pentecostal hermeneutic.

The very fact that Kempe, a laywoman, wrote a treatise recording her special intimacies with God might be seen as audacious self-promotion. And, in a way, it is. In Voaden’s words, Kempe “seemed to be fired by the intensity of her visionary encounters in a way that apparently encouraged her to believe that she could challenge religious authority, while simultaneously seeking its endorsement of her visions and her way of life” and that had Kempe been “better versed in *discretio spirituum*, or better served by her amanuensis, we might now have Saint Margery” (156). I agree. However, that is not to say that Kempe would have been more effective in fulfilling her divine mandate to communicate the word of God had she been better skilled in the formal religious discourse. Clearly Kempe would have been better received (by some) if she had quietly engaged in *probatio* and consistently recorded her experiences according to official conventions, but perhaps if she (a laywoman) had known and abided by *discretio spirituum*, we might not know about her today. Moreover, maybe the fact that Kempe so insistently seeks clerical validation is a sign that something radically different was indeed going on in her, something that she knew was both bizarre and divine, and not a sign of her own “impure” response, “inordinate love,” or even demon possession. Finally, if her experience of the Holy Spirit motivated her as it does modern Pentecostals, one might argue that her inability to abide by *discretio spirituum* was not simply because she was uneducated or proud or dimwitted or that it contradicted her desire to be revered as Christ, but that it was a function of her “Pentecostal” spirituality (affective and evangelistic);
that she was physically compelled to preach (and to write); and that her sense of the “presence” was so personal, tangible, and overwhelming that she did not know how to reconcile it (nor could it be reconciled) with those of her contemporaries in any other way than to wrestle with her “felyngys” loudly and emotionally. As Nicholas Watson observes,

[In]vaded by visions, voices, and fits of prophetic knowing, flooded by bouts of weeping that were hard to read as lucid signs of God’s presence, a conundrum to herself and her community, Kempe refused any of the easy resolutions offered her: to be silent; to treat her tears as illness; to regularize her life as anchoress or nun; to reject or even (after a period) doubt, her revelations. (396)

It is a typical pentecostal response.

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NOTES

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1. For the most recent and comprehensive study of Kempe and her gift of miraculous language, see the newly published book by Cooper-Rompato. Unfortunately, I was unable to include it in my research due to its publication date, but I am eagerly awaiting my opportunity to read her latest work.

2. Voade describes discretio spiritualis as “the mechanism, through which visionaries were authorized, controlled as well as empowered...the discernment of spirits” (40). A familiar concept, it provided a “model which facilitated the communication and acceptance of [the] divine message,” a discourse, developed and defined by men, which “shaped the transcendent experience of the visionary, the articulation of that experience, and the expectations of the audience” (44). Kempe’s textual articulation of her holy calling/visison (ch. 5), carefully located in time and place and similar to Bridget of Sweden’s, “clearly demonstrates an awareness of the doctrine of discretio spirituali” (118).

3. For a critique of Kempe as a hysterical woman, see Knowles. For a discussion of exclusionary powers and the way women achieved authority through mystical experiences and their female bodies, see Finke, 29-44, and Lothie.

4. Citing Petroff’s study of thirteenth-century Italian women visionaries, Valerie Lagorio notes the similarities between Kempe and these medieval women mystics: “They were basically healthy, highly self-motivated, independent and assertive women, who, in their twen-
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5. Several times Kempe is accused of Lollardy and/or threatened with burning. According to Barry Windeatt, "Two habits especially bring Margery under suspicion: her reproval of vain swearing and her constant speaking of the Bible, which is construed as preaching by those who hear her" (94). See Book I, chaps. 13, 16, 46, 52, 53, 54, 55 for these occasions. For an in-depth analysis of Kempe's "homiletic rhetoric" and of the way that her Book deconstructs her claims to teach, see Gertz-Robinson's "Stepping into the Pulpit."

6. I am referring to Pentecostals as those Christians who believe that the experience of the early Church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) was the fulfillment of prophecy (Joel 2:28-31)—"it shall come to pass / afterward / That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; / Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, / Your old men shall dream dreams, / Your young men shall see visions. / And also on My menservants and on My maidservants / I will pour out My spirit in those days"—and that a Second Pentecost occurred in Los Angeles in 1906, which "was the climax to the growing swell of charismatic experiences among revival and Apostolic Faith movements" (Stroenstad 12). Pentecostals believe that "contemporary experience should be identical to apostolic Christianity, that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is separate from sanctification, and that tongues speaking is evidence or proof of the baptism in the Holy Spirit" (Stroenstad 13). See also Neitz 198-205.

7. In an attempt to legitimize Kempe's religious experience, John Hirsch contextualizes it within a tradition of paramysticism, "found on the boundaries between mysticism and devotion" from the medieval era to the modern (19). Like Hirsch, I see Kempe's ecstatic experience as precipitated by affective devotion and draw a comparison with modern Pentecostals, but while Hirsch is primarily concerned with issues of veracity of both Kempe and Pentecostals, I explore the pentecostal hermeneutic for the way it elucidates Kempe's theology and practice.

8. Though modern Pentecostalism has its roots in the Protestant evangelical movement of the mid-eighteenth century, "enthusiasm" has existed throughout Protestant and Catholic religious experience. In Charisma and Community, Mary Neitz contends that enthusiastic religion can be traced back to "the writings of the early church and to the medieval mystics" and that "neo-pentecostalism" is characterized by similar "physical manifestations" that make religion "emotional, personal, and experiential" (191). For a list of the forerunners of pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, see Pooe, 1-27. For a description of the enthusiasm of eighteenth-century ecstatic Elisabeth of Spaebeck, see Bazire, 80. For descriptions of exuberance (like that of Kempe) among American blacks in the eighteenth century, see Ignatiev, 608. For a study of Canadian enthusiasm in the late twentieth century, see Grenville, 418.

9. In their introduction to The Chastising of God's Children, Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge position Kempe in this tradition of enthusiasm, depicting her participatory meditations as "mean imaginative re-enactments" of the gospels and examples of the religious fervor that the Chastising author seeks to repress (79). For a discussion of Pentecostalism and enthusiasm, see Taves, 328-41. For an illuminating discussion of the discursive tactics in The Chastising, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Books Under Suspicion, especially chapters 6 and 7.

10. I understand experiential theology to refer to faith in God that "originates in an experience,...is confrontational...[and occurs] when a person experiences deity on a personal, mystical level, thereby receiving a knowledge of God that is not a cognitive knowledge
[received through study of God or the Bible], but an experiential knowledge, a participatory knowledge" (Tate 168).

11. My method is similar to Richard Firth Green's in "The Ballad and the Middle Ages," 164-184. Green advocates "the study of traditional ballads first copied down in more recent times" as a fruitful way to speculate about "an oral tradition anterior to the earliest appearance of any given ballad in print," despite the possibility that received versions may be contaminated (165). Similarly, our fear of positing religion as transhistorical or human subjectivity as coherent and stable, should not blind us to the benefit of studying modern cases of religious enthusiasm as a way of speculating on those that are historically prior, particularly in view of the partiality of "autobiographical" religious texts written by laywomen in the late middle ages with which to compare Kempe.

12. Kerby-Fulton describes probatio in Reformist Apocalypticism and Flore Phenomen. "[A] series of texts whereby one could tell a true visionary from a fraudulent one. In testing the validity of any vision, much weight was placed on the moral and spiritual character of the visionary" (124).

13. In his introduction to The Book of Margery Kempe, Barry Windeatt notes that these texts are "the key influences that connect her inner life with contemporary devotion" and that while Kempe's reference to Hilton likely refers to The Scale of Perfection, it may also embrace his Epistle on the Mixed Life which instructs the layman in "how some form of the contemplative life may be pursued amidst the distractions of an active life in the world" (10). Also, Kempe mentions the Stimulus Anemiæ (ch. 58), which further links her to "that meditative tradition of projecting oneself into, and empathizing with the scenes of Christ's life" (10). Chapters 6 and 7 of her Book record her own devotional meditations in which she inserts herself into biblical scenes.

14. Though the terms "pentecostal" and "charismatic" are often used interchangeably, they are distinguishable. Charismatists tend to place less emphasis on experiencing the Holy Spirit, and more on knowing God and Christ. Pentecostals and charismatics often describe the same phenomenal experience of the Holy Spirit, but Pentecostals tend to be more sectarian and distinguish themselves based on their hermeneutics. While Kempe's spirituality could be seen as simply charismatic, in some important instances she seems to have a more pentecostal orientation (for example, her speaking in tongues, boldness, and evangelism). See Neitz, 1981.

15. In The English Mystical Tradition, Knowles describes how a soul must free itself of "all inordinate love of, and adherence to, anything apart from God, the divine agency," before the Holy Spirit will "take possession of its faculties and infuse love and knowledge to which the recipient opposes no barrier" because of their purity (17-20).

16. For a description of how unrealized ideals cause Pentecostals to be "in a constant struggle to encounter Pentecostal religious experience," see Drogenge, 36.

17. See Cooper's "Miraculous Translation in The Book of Margery Kempe," 270-298, for an analysis of how Kempe attempts to authenticate her vocation by drawing on a tradition of "divinely-aided conversation and confession between foreign speakers as experienced by SS. Dominic, Pachomius, Clare of Montefalco, and Lutgard of Aywieres" (287). Cooper claims that because the vernacular miracle does lead to Margery's words being translated into Latin, it can be seen as related to the miraculous gift of Latinity experienced by other holy women.


19. In summarizing his interviews with Canadian evangelicals in the 1980s, Grenville concludes that religious experience does indeed fuel evangelism: "having a sudden religious
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insight or awakening, feeling you were somehow lifted out of your own by a powerful spiritual force, and being slain in the Spirit are all directly related to how frequently you share your faith with others” (427).

20. Falling down or being “slain in the Spirit” is widespread in Pentecostalism, particularly in communal church settings. For an eye-witness account of a modern Pentecostal revival, see Woodward, 54. That Pentecostals refer to this encounter with the Holy Spirit as being “slain,” arguably a violent and terrible experience, suggests that both Kempe and Pentecostals share an experience of the Holy Spirit as “hedows” or “horrible.”

21. The likening of her experience to drunkenness recalls the experience of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost when they are filled with the Holy Spirit and bystanders describe them as drunk (Acts 2:13-15).

22. For more on Margery’s “homely” mysticism, see Sarah Beckwith, 34-57.

23. See Poloma for an extensive description of modern pentecostal theology and phenomena.

24. Poloma writes, “The major forms of prophecy found in contemporary Pentecostalism are two-fold: (1) a democratized charism available to all Spirit-baptized persons and (2) an ecclesiastical gift that is being restored to Christianity.”

25. Kempe’s Book represents her as a charismatic apostle/martyr; just as the persecutors of Stephen are “cut to the heart” (Acts 7:54), so is Kempe’s unbelieving cleric.

26. Following her successful defense, Kempe describes how the people are filled with rejoicing because though she is “not letrayd,” the Lord gives her “witte and wisdom to answer in so many lerned men” (257). This is likely a rhetorical strategy that recalls Acts 4:14 in which those on the Sanhedrin see the boldness of Peter and John and, perceiving that they are uneducated and untrained men, marvel and realize that the apostles have been with Jesus. For Kempe and the apostles, their boldness and ability to “answer” though untrained are proof of their authority and of the Spirit’s movement on their behalf (see also Romans 8:26-27 and Mark 13:11 for Paul’s and Jesus’s teaching on the subject).

27. Pettoff describes how “the medieval doctrine of the good woman held as paramount the Christian and Marian virtues of patience, submissiveness, chastity, strenuous piety, and self-effacement. The good woman was the invisible woman, the silent woman” (166). For an analysis of the various tropes used to authorize medieval women’s charismatic writing, see Newman, 233.

28. Vorden writes that “women read, or had read to them, mostly devotional material, gospel harmonies, saints’ lives and accounts of visions. The bulk of this material was in the vernacular; and had those qualities which made it attractive for reading aloud: it was vivid, simply presented, colourfully described, repetitive and concrete” (35).

29. See Watson’s “Censorship and Cultural Change,” which posits that Nicholas Love’s Mourn was a “conservative response to the Wycliffite Bible, and an attempt to provide the substitute of devout meditations for the increasingly widespread (and by now suspect) lay practice of Bible study” (353).

30. Some Pentecostals describe experiential theology as part of the hermeneutic process itself. In Spirit, Scripture, Theology, Stronstad claims that experiential presuppositions are a complementary element of hermeneutics which give an important “pre-understanding of the text” which guards the interpreter from the “all too common tendency for Western man to reduce the spiritual reality of the Bible to rationalistic proportions” (73).

31. For a discussion of the believer’s tendency to use metonymy in contrast to the ‘intellectual’ tendency to use metaphor, see Droogers.

32. In Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement, Csoerdas describes how dramatic “skits” are used to teach children Bible stories and claims that “it is
the theme of imagination that makes the skit explicitly Charismatic" (190). The audience was expected to take away an understanding of imagination as mental pictures, "along with concrete examples of how imaginative scenes might unfold for them" (190).

33. It is perhaps significant that within Pentecostalism there is a spectrum of enthusiastic experience and different beliefs regarding what is appropriate for visions and interpretations, a system of discentia (more or less formally defined, depending on the Pentecostal community). Moreover, "manifestations" of the Holy Spirit are often contested and seen as "counterfeits" induced by the "flesh" or demons. See Taves, 328.

34. For a discussion of the biases in the study of Pentecostal religion and a refutation of Pentecostalism as a solely lower class, historically regressive and politically conservative phenomenon, see Neitz, 17.

35. In The Revelations of Margery Kempe, John Hirsch recognizes that modern American Pentecostals are "saturated not in mysticism, but in Biblical and evangelical precedents" but that "these present and real differences can disguise deeper correspondences current in both traditions" (5).

36. For an example of this hermeneutic in practice, see Stromstad, 71-73.

37. As Newman points out, there is "very little overlap between holy women who wrote and those who were written about.... It is as if a woman's active engagement with the word—even God's word—were too dangerous to let her life be upheld as a model for imitations" (234).

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