



**POWER  
GENDER AND  
CHRISTIAN  
MYSTICISM**

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# POWER, GENDER AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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In the western Christian tradition, the mystic was seen as having direct access to God, and therefore great authority. Dr Jantzen discusses how men of power defined and controlled who should count as a mystic, and thus who would have power: women were pointedly excluded. This makes her book of special interest to those in gender studies and medieval history.

Its main argument, however, is philosophical. Because the mystical has gone through many social constructions, the modern philosophical assumption that mysticism is essentially about intense subjective experiences is misguided. This view is historically inaccurate, and perpetuates the same gendered struggle for authority which characterises the history of western Christendom.

This book is the first on this topic to take issues of gender seriously, and to use these as a point of entry for a deconstructive approach to Christian mysticism.

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN  
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POWER, GENDER AND  
CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

# CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION

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Religion increasingly is seen as a renewed force, and is recognised as an important factor in the modern world in all aspects of life – cultural, economic, and political. It is no longer a matter of surprise to find religious factors at work in areas and situations of political tension. However, our information about these situations has tended to come from two main sources. The news-gathering agencies are well placed to convey information, but are hampered by the fact that their representatives are not equipped to provide analysis of the religious forces involved. Alternatively, the movements generate their own accounts, which understandably seem less than objective to outside observers. There is no lack of information or factual material, but a real need for sound academic analysis. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion will meet this need. It will give an objective, balanced, and programmatic coverage to issues which – while of wide potential interest – have been largely neglected by analytical investigation, apart from the appearance of sporadic individual studies. Intended to enable debate to proceed at a higher level, the series should lead to a new phase in our understanding of the relationship between ideology and religion.

A list of titles in the series is given at the end of the book.

*To Ann*

In the name of us all  
Let there be peace and love among us.

May the skies be clear,  
And may the streets be safe.

In the name of us all,  
Let there be peace.  
(Summerville 1972, adapted)

'Hence this book. It is "unfinished." No theology, no book, is ever enough. *Only justice is enough*, and if any book can help us along this common way, may it be read and taken to heart.' (Heyward 1982: iv)

## *General editors' preface*

In the early 1970s it was widely assumed that religion had lost its previous place in Western culture and that this pattern would spread throughout the world. Since then religion has become a renewed force, recognised as an important factor in the modern world in all aspects of life, cultural, economic and political. This is true not only of the Third World, but in Europe East and West, and in North America. It is no longer a surprise to find a religious factor at work in areas of political tension.

Religion and ideology form a mixture which can be of interest to the observer, but in practice dangerous and explosive. Our information about such matters comes for the most part from three types of sources. The first is the media which understandably tend to concentrate on newsworthy events, without taking the time to deal with the underlying issues of which they are but symptoms. The second source comprises studies by social scientists who often adopt a functionalist and reductionist view of the faith and beliefs which motivate those directly involved in such situations. Finally, there are the statements and writings of those committed to the religious or ideological movements themselves. We seldom lack information, but there is a need – often an urgent need – for sound objective analysis which can make use of the best contemporary approaches to both politics and religion. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion is designed to meet this need.

The subject matter is global and this will be reflected in the choice both of topics and authors. The initial volumes will be concerned primarily with movements involving the Christian religion, but as the series becomes established movements invol-



ving other world religions will be subjected to the same objective critical analysis. In all cases it is our intention that an accurate and sensitive account of religion should be informed by an objective and sophisticated application of perspectives from the social sciences.

This work constitutes a stimulating, scholarly and wide-ranging feminist analysis of the ways in which 'mysticism' has been socially constructed in different ways at different times, and is implicitly bound up with issues of authority and gender. Following Michel Foucault, and applying his ideas to mysticism, Jantzen maintains that what matters as mysticism will reflect the institutions of power in which it occurs. For Jantzen, as for Foucault, history may be seen as a struggle between competing power blocks struggling for domination, while from within the mystical tradition (and especially out of the experience of female mystics) have come creative efforts at pushing back the boundaries of institutional power. By utilising a deconstructionist approach, and deploying the widest variety of materials, from all eras of Christian writing, the author is able to show convincingly that women's mystical experiences were regarded as threatening by those in positions of religious authority and were continually subject to social control. Her primary motive in so doing is to counter what she sees as the detrimental effects of the current social construction of mysticism, which has reduced mystical experience to its personal and psychological dimensions alone, thus deflecting attention away from any political and social dynamic it may have.

## *Preface*

This book has been a long time in the making, and I have accumulated many debts. About twelve years ago, I began to develop a long-standing interest in Christian mysticism and spirituality at both a personal and a professional level. I began to write a book about what we could draw from Christian mystics regarding philosophical questions such as evidence for the existence of God, the mystical core of religion, and above all problems of evil and questions of justice. When I looked at what philosophers and theologians say about mysticism, however, it soon became apparent that they were often quite inaccurate as to the actual mystics of the Christian tradition. In fact, a standard practice was to take William James' account of mysticism, written at the turn of the century, as adequate description, and to go on from there without going back to primary sources except perhaps to cull juicy quotations to support a position taken on other grounds. The more I read of the mystical writers of the Christian tradition, the less acceptable such a practice came to appear. I saw an ever-increasing gap between their concerns and those of contemporary philosophers writing about them. I decided that I would not add to the books on mysticism which take little notice of actual mystics; and chose, as a preliminary, to make as careful a study as a non-medievalist could of medieval mystical writing, focusing on one person, but also trying to understand her in a wider context, both socially and in terms of the western mystical traditions reflected in her work. That is how my book on Julian of Norwich (1987) came to be written.

The reasons for choosing Julian as a case study were multiple. She had lived in England; thus it was easier for me to explore her

historical and social context than would have been the case had I chosen a continental writer. She wrote in a language I could read in the original; and her writings fit comfortably between the covers of a single book. She lived almost at the end of the medieval period; in her writings could be traced strands of several of the major mystical traditions of western Christendom. The most significant factor, however, was her gender. Although at the time I began my study of Julian my feminist consciousness was very low, it was important to me to study the life and work of a *woman* mystic, one to whom I instinctively felt a sympathy based on shared gender.

Though the book on Julian is written from a determinedly Christian perspective, the writing of it began to reshape my thinking about the Christian tradition and the relation of gender and power within it: the institutional church seemed, increasingly, to have a lot to answer for. So, however, did modern philosophy as it seemed to me. When I turned from case studies of medieval mystics to philosophical and theological writings about mysticism, I found myself increasingly perplexed. On the one hand, there has been over the past ten or fifteen years a mushrooming of philosophical interest in mysticism and religious experience, with steady publication of new monographs and journal articles. On the other hand, any competent undergraduate can quite easily show that what philosophers say or assume mysticism is like bears little resemblance to actual historical mystics of western Christendom. Such misrepresentation might be understandable if philosophers were not particularly interested in the subject of mysticism; but what is going on when there is so much putative interest, and yet people who would normally insist upon meticulous scholarship are not giving attention to primary sources?

Growing feminist consciousness enabled me to approach my continuing research with a hermeneutic of suspicion: perhaps it was not only philosophers writing about mysticism, but even those who were presenting histories of mysticism who were operating with an understanding shaped by centuries of the power of patriarchy; and perhaps it was this which operated to blind contemporary writers to what mystics were saying. This suspicion was sharpened by a four-year appointment to the

Canadian Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies. Though on the face of it this assignment was poles apart from consideration of medieval mysticism, the total immersion in the interface between rigorous academic thinking and policy formation in the world of power politics made me see the relationship between power and knowledge in a wholly different light. I began to take serious notice of who are the beneficiaries and who are the victims of systems of power/knowledge. In the case of new reproductive technologies, the beneficiaries are those with powerful vested interests: pharmaceutical companies, big science, big business. The victims, too often, are women, children, aboriginal people, disabled people, ethnic minorities.

The glaring interconnection between power and gender which had been forced on to my attention in the study of new reproductive technologies and health care markedly shifted my focus in thinking about mysticism as well. In early and medieval Christendom, after all, there was an overt link between the knowledge of God gained through the mystical life and the authority which could be claimed on the basis of that special knowledge. When I looked again, it was possible to trace a series of major changes in the understanding of what counts as mystical; and in every one of the changes there was a gendered struggle for power and authority. This book is an account of some of those struggles, and an analysis of their philosophical implications.

We are no longer living under the sacred canopy of the medieval era: people who say that they have mystical experiences are not likely to be given vast political and financial authority on the basis of the knowledge of God which they claim. Religion has been discarded as a public force: we could say that of all the privatisations, the privatisation of religion has been one of the most thorough and the least remarked, even though it continues to shape secular consciousness in ways that are often unconscious. At the same time religion, and especially religious experience, has become far more available to women – women who, in idealisation though not in reality, are also private, and are the primary keepers of house and home. A connection can be traced between the domestication of women and the domestication of religion such that claims to religious experience become permissible for

women in direct proportion to the decline of overt public importance of religion. And I have argued in this book that one of the reasons why philosophers of religion often ignore the primary sources of mystical writings and their social and cultural locatedness is that if these were to be taken into account, then it would be necessary to recognise the web of knowledge, power and gender which a study of those sources exposes: knowledge and power which, in the modern era, was largely transferred from the church to the academy.

If I am right, then most current philosophical writing about mysticism is misguided, asking questions and dealing with issues in ways that are not only inaccurate to mystical writings but also using the resulting distortion to bolster philosophical and theological positions which the mystical writers themselves would have repudiated and which must now be read as central to the totalising enterprise of modernity. Furthermore, such philosophical writings are, I argue, also actually perpetuating the gendered struggle for authority under new, secular guise. Those who seek for justice must become aware of the ways in which the language of the mystical has been appropriated by philosophers and theologians, whose discourses of power work, often unwittingly, against women and oppressed groups; and we must reclaim the dangerous memories of mystical writers, especially women, which enable our discourses of resistance.

My first thanks go to Ann Peart, who has partnered me and this book in many ways throughout its writing. She has read and commented on every chapter, many of them several times, and has literally 'heard me into speech'. For being herself, for our shared struggle for justice and truth, for all her practical and intellectual help, this book is dedicated to her with much love and gratitude. Our grandbaby Elizabeth, and her mom Jill Arthur, have cheered our lives and made inescapable the effort for a more just future. The Women in Theology group of which we are a part has been a source of strength, as has been the St Hilda Community and the informal group of women who meet together at Websters in Womenspace. For helping to birth my feminist consciousness I owe a great debt to Janet Morley. Ann Clarke has been an insightful counsellor and friend. The members of the

Canadian Royal Commission, as well as our support staff, had more to do with this book than they are ever likely to know; and I am grateful for the experience of four years of thinking and working together. One of the special delights of frequent trips to Canada was reconnection with my cousins Gloria and Vern Neufeld-Redekop: some of the preliminary thinking around issues of mysticism and gender was first presented to a group of people who met in their home, developed in Bev Harrison's study at Union Theological Seminary, and presented again to a group of people taught by Carol MacCormack at Bryn Mawr: my thanks to all of them. Stewart Sutherland first encouraged me to make a serious academic study of mystical writers, even though that was an unusual thing for a professional philosopher of religion to do: Keith Ward later affirmed me in that study. Deborah Padfield read and typed early drafts of some of the chapters, and has been a friend throughout, as have Richard and Doreen Padfield and Beth. Jeremy Carrette made perceptive comments on a first draft of the book: it was he who first suggested the phrase 'technologies of patriarchy' to describe what happened in the changing social constructions of mysticism in western thought. For comments on particular passages, and for helpful guidance, friendship, bright ideas, loans of books and articles, and saving me from many mistakes, I wish to thank Peter Byrne, Brenda Gillon, Graham Gould, Mary Elisabeth Moore, Susan Hardman-Moore, Anna Claire Mulder (for helping me see that 'a resentful woman is divine'), Patrick Sherry, Terry Tastard, Mark Wynne and Theo Zweerman. Many audiences, academic and non-academic, have heard sections of some of these chapters; their questions and comments have helped to shape the final result. As always, I owe a particular debt to my students. Alex Wright and two anonymous readers from Cambridge University Press made perceptive and affirmative comments for which I am grateful.

Earlier drafts of sections of some of the chapters have been published elsewhere: in particular, material from chapters 1 and 9 in *Hypatia* (Autumn 1994); chapter 4 section 3 in *Eckhart Review* (Spring 1994); material from chapter 8 in *Religious Studies* 1989 and 1990; material from chapter 3 in *King's Theological Review* (1988) and from chapter 9 in the same journal (1990).

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## CHAPTER I

### *Feminists, philosophers and mystics*

The important questions to be asked by theology ... are:  
who should do theology, and where, and in whose interest,  
and for whom? (Metz 1980: 58)

What is mysticism? Is it an experience of direct communion with God? Or is it a human phenomenon, at its best benign piety and at its worst muddle-headed fanaticism claiming divine authority for intolerant behaviour? Is mysticism something shared by all world religions, which could serve as a link between different ways of life and belief? Or is the idea of a mystical core of religion misguided – perhaps yet another of the totalising discourses of modernity? What does mysticism have to do with justice? Is mystical experience private and subjective, or does it have political and social implications? Is mysticism related to gender, perhaps especially available to women? Or is feminist mysticism impossible; is mysticism essentially patriarchal?

Implicit in all of these questions is an agenda of power. The fascination of the subject of mysticism is not, I suggest, simply a fascination with intense psychological experiences for their own sake, but rather because the answers to each of these questions are also ways of defining or delimiting authority. The connection of questions of power to questions of mysticism is obvious as soon as one stops to think of it: a person who was acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will. It is obvious, too, that if defining mysticism is a way of defining power, whether institutional or individual, then the question of who counts as a mystic is