ARTICLES

The Making of Modern "Mysticism"

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Mysticism, as a category long prominent in the study of religion, has been widely critiqued over the last quarter century for its essentialist illusions. That critical literature, while based on historicist convictions, has rarely extended such historical vision to the liberal religious culture that pro- duced the modern construct. This article bridges the vast gap between Michel de Certeau's genealogy of "mysticism" focused on seventeenth- century France and the accounts of those scholars who focus on the boom of academic studies at the turn of the twentieth century. It presents the emergence of "mysticism" as a category in Anglo-American discourse from its development during the English Enlightenment within critiques of false religion to its Romantic remaking within Transcendentalist Unitarian circles in the United States. In taking seriously the religious and intellectual worlds that produced William James's theorizing, the article opens wider perspectives on why the construct came to carry so much weight in both the study and the practice of religion. T

HERE IS HARDLY A MORE beleaguered category than "mysticism" in the current academic study of religion. Its fall from theoretical grace has been precipitous. William R. LaFleur, for example, opens his essay on the "body" in Mark C. Taylor's recent collection Critical Terms for Religious Studies with the observation that the body has utterly eclipsed

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mysticism as an axial term for the discipline. "Twenty or thirty years ago," LaFleur justly remarks, "the situation would have been reversed: Mysti- cism would have been a core term and bodies . . . would not have deserved a separate entry" (36). The tide began to shift in 1978 with Steven T. Katz's collection Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, and by 1983 Katz's col- league Hans H. Penner openly dismissed "mysticism" as "a false category," an essentialist "illusion" (89). Penner, in effect, set perpetual quotation marks around the term to signal the emptiness of its sui generis preten- sions to universality and transcendence.

In 1985 philosopher Wayne Proudfoot significantly advanced this critical turn with a sustained analysis of mysticism's historical prominence as a category within the study of religion. Proudfoot charted its develop- ment from Friedrich Schleiermacher forward as part of a larger "protective strategy" designed to seal off a guarded domain for religious experience amid modernity—one in which religious feelings would be safe from re- ductionistic explanations and scientific incursions (119–154). Proudfoot argued that scholars needed to free themselves from this Romantic theo- logical baggage and stop securing mysticism within an autonomous, ir- reducible, and universal realm. Through the work of Katz, Penner, and Proudfoot, mysticism was returned to the conditioning webs of history, culture, and language. Religious experience was no more unmediated, unique, ineffable, or perennial than any other kind of experience.

A decade after Proudfoot's critique Grace Jantzen's Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism offered a parallel undoing, dissecting the ways in which modern constructions of mysticism had privatized and domesti- cated it, the ways in which "the connection of power and gender" had ostensibly been severed by William James and company (2). The modern making of mysticism, according to Jantzen, had become a way of keeping politics, materiality, embodiment, power relations, and social ethics off the scholarly table. The very depoliticization of "religious experience" was, in other words, highly political and required dismantling—an ideologi- cal unmasking that amounts now to carnivalesque merriment (Chidester: 369–370; Fitzgerald 2000a, 2000b: 27–29, 159, 202–203; Jantzen; King; McCutcheon 1997, 2001: 4–6, 97). A century after James made it a favored construct in his religion of solitary epiphanies, it is safe to say that "mys- ticism" is a category in disrepair, sunk in the disrepute of its multiple occlusions. In Religion after Religion, Steven Wasserstrom even launches a neologism to concretize this growing suspicion of mysticism's long dominion within the scholarship on the History of Religions. He calls this academic fixation "mystocentrism," and "centrism" of any kind, we know by now, is a very bad thing (239–241). To join mysticism to it is a death rattle.

Such critiques have much to commend them to a cultural historian of religion, for from first to last they are arguing for a sharply historicist per- spective. Mysticism is never essentially this or that but, instead, as Jantzen rightly says, "a constantly shifting social and historical construction" (24). That very claim for history, though, needs to be extended to those who were responsible for dehistoricizing and universalizing the term in the first place. James, for example, becomes little more than a straw man in Jantzen's cri- tique (3, 24, 306, 320), and the larger culture of New England liberalism, which gave birth to James, is nowhere to be found in any of these critical accounts of the category's modern formation. The process of mysticism's reinvention in departicularized form needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity. If the concepts that this liberal, Tran- scendentalist culture bequeathed now seem threadbare or worse, it none- theless behooves us to reenter that religious world to see what negotiations animated these constructs in the first place. The critique of such scholarly categories requires, in other words, a firmer historical grounding—one that allows for better understanding even of the religious liberals who produced the models now being taken apart and summarily dismissed.

More than that, getting a closer view of the term's genealogy will also correct a major historical oversight: namely, the development of mysti- cism as a modern category has been treated as having two key moments of provenance, but these are widely separated in time and are at best flim- sily connected. The first period, following historian Michel de Certeau, is early-seventeenth-century France, in which mystical texts are said to emerge as a distinct class: that is, a new polemical discourse isolating a mystic corpus comes into being, and, with that naming, according to de Certeau, "a mystic tradition was fabricated" (1986: 82, 1992: 16, 76–77, 107–110). The second frame of reference (and the more pervasive one) leaps ahead to the turn of the twentieth century and focuses on such writ- ers as James, Evelyn Underhill, Rufus Jones, Nathan Söderblum, Rudolf Otto, and their considerable progeny (Bridges; Cupitt: 26–27; King: 7; Kippenberg: 176–182; Lears: 142–215; Sharpe: 113–115, 188–189; Wasser- strom: 239–241). The combination of those two chronologies, which produces a gaping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hole with only Schleiermacher to plug it, skims across many of the most important de- velopments within the category's modern formation. Most of the fig- ures who actually matter in making mysticism a universal construct fall into this massive historical gap and receive little or no mention at all.1

1 The historical gap, the leap from de Certeau's account to the late modern version, stands out with instructive clarity in Nicholas Lash's The Beginning and the End of "Religion" (167). My ac- count focuses more on the term's history within the study of religion and less on the term's gene-

Clearing the ground for the recovery of mysticism as a modern arti- fact is also important for making sense of how the catchall term spiritual- ity has now spread itself so luxuriantly in contemporary Euro-American culture. Mysticism is, indeed, the great foundation upon which this re- vived love of spirituality has been built. "The mother sea and fountain head of all religions," William James wrote in a letter in June 1901 in antici- pation of his Gifford Lectures, "lies in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense" (2001: 501). Understanding how mysticism took on such a wide sense is an important step in fathoming how spirituality itself has now become such an expan- sive term in the religious vernacular of the twenty-first century.

Nailing that history down is not a straightforward task, and the dire warning of an unsigned essay in the Edinburgh Review in 1896 still rings true:

> There are certain terms of general classification that seem predestined to breed confusion in criticism and thought; and among these the term Mysticism might be almost considered one of the most pre-eminently bewildering. . . . The epithet, indeed, is one of those of which the signifi- cance embraces such varying characteristics that no dictionary can keep pace with the subtle developments it is perpetually acquiring. . . . The friction of common use wears away old limits, and the daily language of daily life, hurrying past, confesses its poverty of invention by a constant adaptation of old verbal symbols—begged, borrowed, and stolen from the most unlikely sources—to its own immediate exigencies. Thus it is, as we all know and continually forget, that, while the diction of bygone days survives, senses utterly unfamiliar to the past attach themselves to every part of speech, making, in the matter of meanings, a recurrent game of definitions. (298) The historical excavation of modern mysticism is, to be sure, a delicate under- taking in which the historian acts as archaeologist dusting away sedimented layers to arrive at an array of subtle shifts and everyday frictions.

That mysticism should come to stand, by the turn of the twentieth century, as the universal quintessence of religious experience was anything but obvious. Through the early decades of the eighteenth century, the English category of "mysticism" did not exist. The prevailing classifica- tion instead was "mystical theology," and it signified a specific devotional branch within Christian divinity. In 1656 Thomas Blount, working off a

alogy as part of a history of Christian theology and exegesis. The latter history is taken up notably in Bouyer and McGinn: xiv–xviii, 265–291. Where McGinn widens his historiographical lens be- yond Christian theology to philosophical, psychological, and comparativist approaches, he largely reproduces the gap found elsewhere. He rightly critiques de Certeau's specific genealogy as far too narrow and then concentrates on the flowering of studies from James forward.

Catholic description of mystical theology from 1647, arrived at this defi- nition for his formative Glossographia: "Mystical Theology, is nothing else in general but certain Rules, by the practise whereof, a vertuous Chris- tian may attain to a nearer, a more familiar, and beyond all expression comfortable conversation with God" (s.v. "mystical"). Mystical theology, in other words, was a way of life that involved the Christian in a "con- stant exercise" of prayer, contemplation, and self-denial (Cressy: 635–636). Blount's work, it is worth noting, contained no parallel entries for the substantive nouns mystic and mysticism (one indication that de Certeau's elliptic French genealogy cannot be extended too far). Also, among the most common associations for the term mystical remained its connection to biblical commentary, that is, the exegetical discernment of the inter- nal, hidden senses of scriptural texts, the spiritual and arcane elements behind the surface of the literal. This remained evident in as basic a compendium as Ephraim Chambers's Cyclopædia (1738), which still fore- grounded "the mystical sense of Scripture" and "MYSTIC theology" and, like Blount, did not employ mysticism per se as a category (s.v. "mysti- cal"). Through the early eighteenth century the meanings attached to mystic and mystical were inextricably woven into a larger system of Chris- tian theology, linked at the level of practice to a recognizable set of devo- tional and exegetical habits.

Mysticism, as an actual term unto itself in the English language, first crystallized within the mid-eighteenth-century critique of enthusiasm. Hints of this larger turn were apparent, for example, in Chambers's as- sociation of the mystics with unregulated spiritual impulses, "fanatic ecstasies, and amorous extravagancies" (s.v. "mystics"). But it was Henry Coventry (ca. 1710–52), a relatively minor player in the larger world of the English Enlightenment and a confrere of Horace Walpole and Conyers Middleton, who first employed the term mysticism as part of a sustained critique of sectarian fanaticism. In a series of dialogues entitled Philemon to Hydaspes: Or, The History of False Religion, the initial installment of which appeared in 1736, Coventry explicitly contrasted "the seraphic entertainments of mysticism and extasy" with the "true spirit of accept- able religion" (56, 60). By the latter, he meant a liberal and reasonable commitment to civic virtue, tolerant cosmopolitanism, public decorum, and aesthetic proportion. Religion, rightly practiced, was "a liberal, manly, rational, and social institution," and the "deluded votaries" of mysticism had no place in that world of calm rationality, moderated passions, and refined tastes (Coventry: 44). The term was thus socially situated within debates about the fundamental comportment of religious people: Were they to carry themselves with the genteel gravity of Cambridge divines and dons or the bumptious assurance of Quakers and Methodists?

Coventry certainly shared in wider Enlightenment suspicions of false religion as a product of credulity, imposture, fear, the ignorance of natu- ral causes, and euhemerism, and his other dialogues tapped into all of those explanations at one point or another. His account of mysticism, though, was more original and sharp-edged. Probing for its erotic psy- chology, Coventry went farther than the usual sexualizing of enthusiasts, epitomized in the prurience and wit of Jonathan Swift, who, in his Dis- course Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit (1704), had richly satirized the "ogling" and "orgasmus" of Quaker spiritual exercises (140– 141). Whereas Swift dwelled on parallels between spiritual zeal and earthly lust, Coventry, in a move that historians of the study of religion have failed to credit at all, developed an inchoate theory of sublimation and projec- tion to explain the amorous qualities of "mystical dissoluteness" (55).2 In contrast to Hume's emphasis on the passions of fear and hope as the ori- gins of false religion and in contrast to the commonplace linkage of en- thusiasm with melancholy, Coventry concentrated on the unruly passion of love and its wildly illusory distortions among those of "warm and san- guine tempers" (48).

In Coventry's analysis the great source of all mystical devotion was "disappointed love": The frustrated passion is "transferred from mere mortals to a spiritual and divine object, and love . . . is sublimated into devotion" (47). That divine object was necessarily "an imaginary and ar- tificial" contrivance, a mistaken substitute, a product of the "wantonest appetites and wishes" (Coventry: 51, 61). In working from the perspec- tive of the passions, which were understood to be stronger and more pre- dominant in women, Coventry marked mysticism as primarily female, with a spirituality of sublimated sexuality making up "the far greatest part of female religion" (55). He found such displacement of the sensual dou- bly sad; it was both a religious illusion and a loss of the genuine tactile pleasures of "connubial love" (121). What devout women really suffered from, one of Coventry's male interlocutors winked to another, was "the want of timely application from our sex" (51). Such analysis fully antici- pated the intellectual "fashion" that James would later complain about in The Varieties of Religious Experience in 1902: namely, "criticising the reli-

2 Heretofore Coventry has been entirely absent from scholarly interpretations of the creation of "religion" as an object of investigation during the Enlightenment. While his work is clearly posi- tioned within a wider philosophical milieu (including such figures as Pierre Bayle, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, Conyers Middleton, and David Hume), his dialogues on false religion warrant recovery in the history of that larger enterprise of critical inquiry. In particular, it was Bayle's ac- count of Antoinette Bourignon in his Dictionnaire historique et critique that served as a starting point for Coventry's theorizing (Bayle: 2: 108–114; Coventry: 64–67).

gious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual life" (1982: 10).3

Critical efforts, like Coventry's, effectively interlaced mysticism and enthusiasm and increasingly demoted mystical theology from the center of learned discussion. Mysticism thus came into being in Anglo-American discourse as a term charged with the reproaches of misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-be-damned extravagance. As Bishop William Warburton concluded contemptuously of devotionalist William Law, who had taken a perverse liking to the esoteric writings of the seventeenth-century pietist Jacob Boehme, "When I reflect on the wonderful infatuation of this ingenious man, who has spent a long life in hunting after, and, with an incredible appetite, devouring, the trash dropt from every species of Mysticism, it puts me in mind of what Travellers tell us of a horrid Fanaticism in the East, where the Devotee makes a sol- emn vow never to taste of other food than what has passed through the entrails of some impure or Savage Animal" (223). Mysticism was, in short, one more excremental waste in the making of an enlightened, reasonable religion. If such critical uses of the terms mystical and mysticism did not ultimately measure up as Enlightenment diagnostics of false religion to priestcraft, enthusiasm, fanaticism, and fetishism, then they certainly took their rise from the same impulse that propelled the other categories to prominence: the growing desire to provide a natural history of religious error. Yet even as mysticism was generalized into a more widely recog- nizable form of false religion, it was marked by a specific Anglican politics of ecclesiastical containment, aimed especially at high-flying devotionalists and inspired women.

Another noteworthy aspect of the term's eighteenth-century transit is the way that philosophers and encyclopedists worked to narrow its sig- nification. When mysticism came to have a life of its own apart from mystical theology and biblical commentary, it initially took on sectarian as much as universal connotations. The Roman Catholic polemic against the mystical practices of Quietists, a discursive formation that de Certeau highlighted for the seventeenth century, gained a new importance, enjoy- ing a vital afterlife during the Enlightenment and even beyond it. Readily absorbed into Pierre Bayle's cosmopolitan republic of letters, that dis-

3 James did not name names in his sharp dismissal of "this re-interpretation of religion as per- verted sexuality" at the outset of The Varieties of Religious Experience (1982: 11n). He had many opponents on this point among psychologists, alienists, and sexologists—not least Havelock Ellis, who exercised a formative influence on erotic theorizing. Among eighteenth-century writers Ellis (1: 312–313) looked to Swift, not Coventry, for inspiration, another example of Coventry's dis- placement, even among those who would have had considerable appreciation for his views.

course provided the basis for the construal of the mystics as a particular sect of Christians, a definable group of pious (if misguided) souls. The modern mystics, though sometimes imagined as part of a stream that flowed back to Origen and Dionysius the Areopagite, were increasingly presented as a small club with a few exemplary members, especially Wil- liam Law, Jacob Boehme, Jeanne Marie Guyon, Antoinette Bourignon, Miquel de Molinos, Francois Fénelon, and Pierre Poiret. In William Hurd's A New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Whole World: Or, A Complete and Impartial View of All Religions in the Various Nations of the Universe, published in 1782, "Account of the Mystics" was placed toward the end of his massive volume, tucked into accounts of other "smaller sects" such as the Muggletonians and French Prophets (670–671). The mystics were, in sum, just one more sect, among many, prickling magisterial forms of established Christianity. Guilty of various absurdities, the mystics were, in Hurd's mind, clearly identifiable with a small group of French Quietists and their misbegotten English successors.

That factional understanding was encapsulated in the 1797 entry on "mystics" in the Encyclopædia Britannica: "MYSTICS, . . . a kind of reli- gious sect, distinguished by their professing pure, sublime, and perfect devotion, with an entire disinterested love of God, free from all selfish considerations. . . . The principles of this sect were adopted by those called Quietists in the seventeenth century, and under different modifications, by the Quakers and Methodists" (1797: 598). Enlightenment encyclope- dists rarely followed Coventry's lead in universalizing mystic and mysti- cism as part of a sweeping critique of false religion; they were largely uninterested in using these terms as global constructs in ways akin to the new eighteenth-century uses of shaman and shamanism, fetish and fetishism, and ventriloquist and ventriloquism (Flaherty; Manuel: 196– 209; Schmidt: 135–198). Instead, they preferred to keep the purview of mystic and mysticism much more contained by making them party labels for a singular brand of recent enthusiasts and pietists. In effect, they handed the palm from mystical theology to the mystics—an often amorous, al- ways muddleheaded sect whose members, for all of their devout fancies, were too absorbed with solitary practices to be overly dangerous.

Such English usages readily crossed the Atlantic. Hannah Adams's compendious Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations, which went through four editions between 1784 and 1817, offered a more far-ranging account of mystics and mysticism than Hurd's parallel vol- ume, but it nonetheless trotted out the same select club of "modern mys- tics" (188–190). In the first edition of Noah Webster's American Dictionary in 1828 the narrow sectarian meaning was front and center: "MYSTICS,

n. A religious sect who profess to have direct intercourse with the Spirit of God"; and mysticism was explicitly joined to "the doctrine of the Mys- tics, who profess a pure, sublime and perfect devotion, wholly disinter- ested" (s.v. "mysticism" and "mystics"). Those habits of classification died hard. As late as 1872, when Vincent Milner published his Religious De- nominations of the World, the mystics continued to be listed as a small sect with the same French and English progenitors (362–365). They re- mained as distinguishable, in Milner's taxonomy, as Baptists or Bud- dhists, if miniscule in number by comparison.

For all the eighteenth-century critique and containment of mysticism, it remained a controversial term in which counter-Enlightenment signifi- cations very much survived and provided a basis for nineteenth-century redirections and expansions. Thomas Hartley, an Anglican divine with evan- gelical sympathies and a scorn for Warburton's mockeries, explicitly chal- lenged the captious pigeonholing of the mystics in his Short Defence of the Mystical Writers (1764): "Let it here be remarked, and constantly remem- bered, that the true Mystics are not to be taken for a sect or party in the church, or to be considered as separatists from it, for they renounce all such distinctions both in name and deed, being the only people that never formed a sect" (373). By Hartley's account, "Mystical means nothing more nor less than spiritual," and the mystics were the "guardians" in all ages of "the spiri- tuality of true religion" (358, 371, 377). Hartley, who subsequently served as an early translator of Swedenborg after meeting the seer in 1769, was both defending introspective devotional writers on the Christian life and help- ing to place them under a new heading: "It remains to be observed here, that the word Mystick or Mystic is not a name they first assumed to them- selves" (376–377). Eighteenth-century defenders, rescuers, and practitioners of mystical theology—from William Law and Thomas Hartley to John Fletcher, Francis Okely, and Ezra Stiles—worked all along against the grain of larger Enlightenment critiques and provided a basis for the nineteenth- century invention of mysticism as the fountainhead of all genuine spiritu- ality. Such writers crossed a wide religious spectrum—sometimes Anglican, sometimes Moravian, sometimes Methodist, sometimes Reformed, some- times Behmenist, sometimes Swedenborgian—but all were dissenters from Enlightenment aspersions of mystics and mysticism (Garrett; Grasso: 264– 269; Schmidt: 10–11, 40; Young: 120–163).4

4 Susan Juster has argued that the mystical writers ceased over the eighteenth century to be dis- tinguished by "genre" and became instead distinguished by "gender"—that is, mysticism became increasingly identified with the porous female body and thereby thoroughly repudiated by gentle- manly elites (283). The eighteenth-century categorization of mystics actually remained quite mixed in terms of gender, and their ongoing admirers constituted a notably male cadre of adepts.

It is important to underline, too, that "Enlightenment" and "counter- Enlightenment" were not a chiaroscuro but, more often than not, shades of gray. Even many of the makers of a Protestant Enlightenment were likely to give credit to mysticism for its cultivation of an inward piety. In his History of the Corruptions of Christianity (1782) the natural philosopher and Unitarian thinker Joseph Priestley, for example, said that he was "ashamed" as a Christian to see what kind of bodily "austerities" and scriptural "perversions" some of the earliest mystics had practiced in Christ's name (5: 350). These horrid "bodily exercises" in which the flesh was tor- mented for the good of the soul were dismissed as both Platonist and Catholic vices (Priestley: 5: 354). But mysticism still mattered in Priestley's enlightened Protestant history as a flawed vessel of true interiority, which some mystics had managed to preserve in the face of all the vulgar super- stitions of pagans and Catholics. "For though the ideas of the Mystics were very confused," Priestley concluded, "they had a notion of the necessity of aiming at something of inward purity, distinct from all ritual obser- vances" (5: 354–355). That was a distinction that liberal universalists and Romantic reclaimers could get their minds around, if not their bodies. Even some gentlemanly critics of devotional extremes were ready to grant that the mystics contained within them the "sparks of real piety" and that they served, in effect, as clandestine prognosticators of pure religious interiority amid the dark ages of superstition (Priestley: 5: 355). Priestley would hardly be the last liberal Protestant to desire a mysticism without ritual practices and without ascetic disciplines.

If the ongoing editions of the Encyclopædia Britannica are taken as a measure—and they are certainly a good and relevant one when it comes to category formation—then the fundamental shift in the Anglo-American discourse on mysticism took place in the 1840s and 1850s. Through the sixth and seventh editions, which ran from 1823 to 1842, the entries on mystics closely follow the eighteenth-century form and sectarian pedigree. It is only with the eighth edition of 1858 that mysticism finally replaces mystics and that the term is well launched on its eclectic, universal path. If still marked with an enthusiast stamp as a "form of error, . . . which mistakes the operations of a merely human faculty for a Divine manifes- tation," it was now something much grander than a peculiar party within Christianity (Encyclopædia Britannica 1858: 755). "Its main characteris- tics are constantly the same," the entry insisted, "whether they find ex- pression in the Bagvat-Gita of the Hindu, or in the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg" (1858: 755). Mysticism becomes a global species of religious experience with innumerable subspecies, historical, geographic, and na- tional: Oriental mysticism, Neo-Platonic mysticism, Greek mysticism, German mysticism, Persian mysticism, Spanish mysticism, and French

Quietism. Also, in a category unto himself and indicative of his singular prominence in the mid-nineteenth-century remaking of mysticism was the eighteenth-century visionary Emanuel Swedenborg, who had chatted up angels as readily as he had courtiers and philosophers. "Nothing really new in the way of mysticism," the entry concluded, "has been produced since the days of the northern seer" (1858: 758). If Swedenborg's fortunes subsequently shifted (he was soon read out of the Britannica's canon of mystics and reassigned to Spiritualist ranks), mysticism's universalistic destiny now appeared set.

The remapping of mysticism in the second third of the nineteenth century was a product of a cosmopolitan literature—part historical, part poetic, part philosophical, part spiritual—and it was evident in a variety of cultural incarnations. The absolutely critical source for this particular remapping in the Britannica was Robert Alfred Vaughan's two-volume compendium, Hours with the Mystics, first published in London in 1856. An English Dissenter of a literary, meditative, and melancholy cast, Vaughan (1823–57) had come around to the ministry by way of his father's example and "the lone dark room of the artist" (1858: 1: xvii). He spent long hours wooing poetry as a youth, but he soon turned to writing theological es- says, including one on Origen and another on Schleiermacher, as prepa- ration for his work on his favored subject. Setting up his great opus as a series of genteel conversations among friends, Vaughan had his interlocu- tors leisurely pursue "mysticism" as it had found expression "among different nations and at different periods" (1888: 1: 21). The summary overview that the Britannica offered in 1858 was essentially a miniatur- ized replica of Vaughan's panoramic perspective; it directly borrowed much of his phrasing, his categories, and his summary estimates. With its mix of critical, appreciative, and diverting voices, Vaughan's work re- mained hard to pin down, sometimes sorting out the chaff, at other times happily harvesting the fruits of medieval mysticism, and at points losing its way in chatty nonchalance.5 Still, it was Vaughan, above all, who opened the way for the popularization of "mysticism" as a conduit into "the high- est form of spirituality" (1888: 2: 351).

Vaughan's work hardly stood alone: The German histories, especially in their recovery of pre-Reformation materials, were especially volumi- nous. These included substantial works on die christliche Mystik by Johann Heinroth, Joseph von Görres, Ludwig Noack, and Adolph Helfferich, all

5 Vaughan's book was widely esteemed, but it also had its severe critics, including Catholic writ- ers who found Vaughan's "mysticism" a terrible trivialization of "mystical theology." It was little more, in this view, than a shallow series of conversations "over port wine and walnuts," with the occasional "flirtation" thrown in (Dalgairns: 7).

published between 1830 and 1853. The French sources were prominent as well, notably Victor Cousin's philosophical account of mysticism that further helped universalize the category, even as it critiqued the putative sacrifice of reason and liberty that mysticism everywhere entailed. Here was a "desperate and ambitious dream" of divine intercourse, Cousin suggested, that demanded the intellectual cautions of empiricism and skepticism wherever it was encountered, East or West (103). Islamicists made their mark, too, particularly through Edward Henry Palmer's Ori- ental Mysticism (1867).

The American contributions, only briefly alluded to in the Britannica entry of 1858, were also noteworthy. At one point, for example, Vaughan tried out a new definition for mysticism, bubbling that "Mysticism is the romance of religion," and none of his immediate contemporaries more personified this turn than "Mr. Emerson, the American essayist" (1888: 1: 27, 2: 8). "Whether in prose or verse," Vaughan wrote, "he is chief singer of his time at the high court of Mysticism" (1888: 2: 8). Vaughan, who made comparing mysticisms an art, labeled Emerson a modern Sufi. Such Orientalist musings aside, his appraisal of Emerson points in the right direction for tracking mysticism's modern transformation, especially in the United States. Transcendentalist New England provides a good case study of both the larger processes and the local peculiarities that remade mysticism in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and America. It is certainly the critical place to look in order to locate the formation of an American religious culture that produced both William James's theorizing and the riotous desires for more and more books on mysticism. The United States was a country, a critic sighed in 1906, where "mysticism" and "a craving for spiritual experiences" had "run mad" (Church Quarterly Review: 332). New England Unitarianism was an unlikely seedbed for the making of modern mysticism. As the Christian Examiner, a flagship periodical of this rationalistic Protestant movement, proudly declared, "What sect has protested so loudly against all mysticism, whether of thought or feeling?" (Fenn: 203). And yet it was precisely in these liberal circles, especially those gravitating toward the Transcendentalist orbit, that mysticism as a construct gained a new currency in American religious and intellectual life. On 20 May 1838 the Transcendental Club, a symposium of Unitarian ministers and intellectuals formed in 1836 to discuss the philosophical and religious scene, met specifically to take up "the question of Mysticism" (Emerson 1965: 502; Myerson: 202). Bronson Alcott was effusive about the conversation, which went on long into the night and included such luminaries in the making as Theodore Parker, Jones Very, George Ripley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson: "On the main topic of conversation, much was said," Alcott noted in his journal: "Was Jesus a mystic? Most deemed

him such, in the widest sense. He was spiritual. . . . He used the universal tongue, and was intelligible to all men of simple soul" (Carlson: 232–233). Alcott himself was especially voluble on the topic of mysticism and feared that he had "overstepped the bounds of true courtesy" by talking too much (Carlson: 233). Still, as he said, "a vision was vouchsafed, and I could but declare it" (Carlson: 233). Emerson, by contrast, was fearful that he had been "a bad associate" at the gathering, "since for all the wit & talent that was there, I had not one thought nor one aspiration" (1965: 502). Trying to quiet this tiny pang of intellectual insecurity, Emerson offered an ex- cuse: "It is true I had not slept the night before" (1965: 502). The all-night discussion of mysticism apparently did nothing to relieve his sluggish frame of mind.

Soon enough, though, Emerson revived himself and warmed to the topic. The next year he and Alcott spent a December afternoon discuss- ing Swedenborg, Boehme, and Plotinus, among others, in "this sublime school" (Alcott 1938: 136). Such interests lingered long for both men: Emerson went on to write an influential essay that presented Emanuel Swedenborg as the representative mystic of the ages, the "largest of all modern souls" (1996: 76). Emerson's praise was hardly unqualified: Swedenborg lacked poetry, tremulous emotion, and sufficient individu- alism and was finally too reliant on scripture and Christian symbolism for Emerson's taste. But the larger estimate of Swedenborg as mystical summit took the better measure of liberal fascinations with the seer. Whether for Frederic Henry Hedge, Walt Whitman, Julia Ward Howe, or Henry James Sr., no one surpassed Swedenborg as the new archetype of mysticism. For his part, Alcott tracked mysticism in all quarters, issu- ing his own "Orphic sayings" in the Dial and eventually amassing a library of hundreds of volumes on "mystic and theosophic lore" (Cameron: 66; Versluis: 153–154). "Mysticism," Alcott sweepingly concluded in Concord Days in 1872, "is the sacred spark that has lighted the piety and illumi- nated the philosophy of all places and times" (1872: 237). As late as 1882 he was still in hot pursuit of such universal teachings, even founding what he called a "Mystic Club" to provide a focus for corporate study and re- flection (1938: 530). Though short-lived, the Mystic Club stood as an emblematic fulfillment of this Transcendentalist ferment, which was by then a half century in the making.

Fellow traveler Margaret Fuller, though not at the Transcendental Club meeting in 1838 where mysticism was the focus of discussion, shared the enthusiasm of Alcott and Emerson. By 1840 she too was immersed in her own religious investigations, declaring herself "more and more what they will call a mystic" and announcing that she was ready to preach "mysti- cism" (Lott: 3–4, 58). In her formidable work Woman in the Nineteenth

Century (1845), Fuller imagined such religious exaltation as an essential vehicle for the progress and elevation of women, a primal source of "spiri- tual dignity" (167). "Mysticism, which may be defined as the brooding soul of the world, cannot fail," she insisted, "of its oracular promise as to Woman" (167). In Transcendentalist hands the term was clearly being dislodged from both its Catholic and its Enlightenment roots. It was neither an ancient form of Christian divinity nor part of a critique of enthusiasm and sectarianism; instead, it was becoming loosely spiritual, intuitive, emancipatory, and universal.

Another exemplar of this Romantic turn is Samuel Johnson, whose Transcendentalist reveries in "the serene, spiritual moonlight" of the early 1840s carried him through Harvard Divinity School and launched him on his lifelong study of Asian religions (12).6 As his memoirist remarked, Johnson's meditations "began soon to take on a mystical phase, which led him into some deep experiences" (14). "This phase lasted but a short time; yet a very effervescent state it was while it lasted" (Johnson: 18). In these New England circles mysticism was being reconstructed at both practical and abstract levels as a domain of esoteric insight and religious explora- tion. For the first time, Americans had a definable club of self-proclaimed mystics all their own, a group ready at a moment's notice, as Fuller's memoir reported of her ecstasies, to "plunge into the sea of Buddhism and mystical trances" (Emerson, Channing, and Clarke: 1: 308).

More sustained reflection soon emerged in these New England circles and even extended to those otherwise wary of the Transcendentalist fer- ment. Harvard's Henry Ware Jr., writing for the Christian Examiner in 1844, lifted up mysticism for the considered attention of all "rational Christians" (316). "There is, perhaps, no one element of religion to which Ecclesiastical history has done so little justice," Ware suggested (311). Predictably cautious in his reclamation, he remained dismissive of "rude and unenlightened" forms of mysticism, including the "Fetichism" of devotions aimed at "outward objects" and the somatic tortures of "self- inflicted penance and scourgings" (309, 311). Ware, like Priestley before him, wanted a rarefied mysticism—one stripped of rituals, material sym- bols, sacramental hosts, and bleeding bodies. "Now," he insisted, "as a higher stage in spiritual life has been reached, we find the mysticism of religious experience" (310). That is a phrase reminiscent of Schleiermacher and worthy of James. "We have used the word mysticism in a wider than

6 Two others in these Transcendentalist circles, Jones Very and Isaac Hecker, also make good examples. Very, a poet, was often heralded as the most eccentric (and hence genuine) mystic of the crowd, while Hecker drank deeply of Alcott's Behmenist investigations before converting to Ca- tholicism (Clarke: 296–297; Farina: 27–31, 68–69, 126, 361; Reeves).

its usual signification," Ware concluded, rightly highlighting the innova- tions of the era, "but what is mysticism but the striving of the soul after God, the longing of the finite for communion with the Infinite" (310)? "Without it," he insisted, "there is, and there can be no religion" (314). Two other figures in these New England Unitarian circles were im- portant intermediaries for the Romantic construct of mysticism: first, Octavius Frothingham, an architect of the Free Religious Association, an organization that pursued (among other liberal projects) the distillation of a universal spirituality through the wide-ranging study of religion; and, second, James Freeman Clarke, a founding figure in the field of compara- tive religions at Harvard Divinity School and the author of a much her- alded text, Ten Great Religions, which made its appearance in two parts in 1871 and 1883. Frothingham and Clarke both tended the mystic flame in its transit from the first Transcendentalist glimmerings to the blaze of fascination at the end of the century. Frothingham imagined the future religion of the United States as a liberal, universal one of the spirit, not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, sacramental, or sectarian, post-Protestant as much as post-Catholic (1891: 115–132, 272–288). Mysticism became the con- necting thread of that universal religion; it is, Frothingham said, "pecu- liar to no sect of believers, to no church, to no religion; it is found equally among orthodox and heterodox, Protestants and Catholics, Pagans and Christians, Greeks and Hindoos, the people of the Old World and the people of the New" (1861: 202, 1982: 249–283, 303–304). Clarke seconded that line of observation in "The Mystics in All Religions," a lecture he delivered in 1880 and then published a year later. The mystic "sees through the shows of things to their centre, becomes independent of time and space, master of his body and mind, ruler of nature by the sight of her inmost laws, and elevated above all partial religions into the Universal Religion. This is the essence of mysticism" (Clarke: 276).

The groundwork had now been laid at Harvard for James's use of the construct in The Varieties of Religious Experience. "The everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition," James averred, is "hardly altered by dif- ferences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note" (1982: 419). Frothingham and Clarke, as James would too, made mysti- cism universal and timeless by turning it into solitary subjectivity and largely shearing it of distinct practices. "The mystic is only by rare excep- tion," Frothingham insisted, "a ritualist or a sacramentalist" (1861: 212). Mysticism provided "a psychology" that served as a basis for spiritual union, a transcultural and transhistorical "intuitive faculty" that allowed for an interior recognition of the Divine Essence (Frothingham 1861: 203– 204). Such experiences were imagined as a contemplative basis for mov-

ing beyond theological differences, for dissolving them in a unifying sea of cosmic consciousness.

> When turned into an essence and a universal, mysticism rapidly lost much of its grounding in history, cultural particularity, and place. Charles Morris Addison made that loss crystal clear when he bluntly asserted in The Theory and Practice of Mysticism in 1918: "A history of Mysticism is an impossibility. It has no history. . . . It appears, like Melchisedec, with- out a genealogy" (106). Vaughn at his more effusive had made much the same claim about the spontaneity of mystical feeling: "Mysticism has no genealogy" (1888: 1: 54). Also, the pursuit of a core of mystical experi- ence seemed not only to dissolve history but also to render social obli- gation an expendable part of mysticism. If, as Frothingham insisted, "genuine spirituality" must still go "into the street" and not seek the clois- ter, then it would have been a point increasingly easy to elude (1861: 229). The desire, above all, was for the poetry and not the politics of mysticism: "We love the mystics for their inward, not for their outward life; because they lift us up above the world, not because they make us faithful in it," Frothingham avowed (1861: 229). "There are others, and enough of them, who will keep us up to that. We crave more mist and moonlight in America; and that the mystics give to us" (Frothingham 1861: 229). Thus, the term, in being shorn of a genealogy, also seemed in imminent danger of losing its grounding in ethical practice, in socially sanctified lives. All of this, of course, provides more fodder for the critics: This Tran- scendentalist Unitarian story, in effect, puts historical flesh on the skele- tons in James's closet. It is not enough, though, simply to provide historical substantiation and specificity for the suspicions that critics already har- bor (and sometimes belabor). Why, after all, did these religious liberals make the choices they made? Were these positions simply the embarrass- ing misdirections that many scholars now take them to be? What possessed these Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and other liberal religionists to take these stands, which so long affected the study of religion and now seem so misguided?

However airy and untenable the new construct seems in hindsight, the invention of an ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, and universal mys- ticism served religious liberals well. As an antipositivist, antimaterialist tool, the new mysticism offered an intellectual shield against untrammeled naturalism, "the fierce onward current of purely scientific thought" (W. Webster: 367). To make claims about the uniqueness or universality of mystical experience, about its irreducibility in the face of medical ma- terialism, was certainly defensive, but few imagined the study of religion, even in its scientific form, as a wholly dispassionate, value-free field of in- quiry. In James's apt phrase, he sought in his treatment of mysticism to

be "as objective and receptive as I can" (1982: 379). There were intellec- tual battles to be both fought and mediated, not least in the growing strife between science and religion, and the study of mysticism was necessarily intended to be part of those debates, not to float free above the fray. "Never was there an age," one anonymous essayist insisted in 1878, "when what is true in Mysticism needed emphatic assertion more than it does to-day. The general drift of thought is antagonistic to the spiritual and the eter- nal. Science, and by this word is generally understood the material and economic province, absorbs in itself all thought and investigation" (Meth- odist Quarterly Review: 412). The modern construction of mysticism as a category was very much grounded in a particular set of cultural negotia- tions over the reality and unreality of the spiritual world. It was intended to engage, not bracket, those metaphysical questions; so, paradoxically enough, it was exactly the sui generis rhetoric that made "mysticism" timely, not timeless.

The American writers on the topic also faced the ragged divisions of the pre– and post–Civil War periods and were, in part, seeking a reli- gious vision to serve the national cause of political and religious union. Frothingham, for one, made it plain that the issues of disunion were cru- cial to his reflections on the future religion of the United States (1891: 115– 132). These divisions whetted his desires to discern a transcendent spirit that would override knotted sectional differences, admittedly on North- ern terms. Unitarian Charles C. Everett, a Harvard professor of theology who took up Clarke's mantle in comparative religions, wrote of mysti- cism in 1874 as having "to do with wholes," with the common and the unifying (23). "The word mysticism, whenever properly used," he said, "refers to the fact that all lives, however distinct they may appear, how- ever varied may be their conditions and their ends, are at heart one" (8). For Everett, no more sublime exemplar of this "mystical view of life" could be adduced than "our martyred president, Abraham Lincoln," a truly "ten- der and heroic soul" who stood for the universal against "modern atom- ism" (8, 10–11). Such meditations are instructively connected to Steven Wasserstrom's discernment of interlocking forms of "spiritual national- ism" in the mystical absorptions of Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, and Henry Corbin in the Cold War era (6). The Unitarian Transcendentalist fascination with a universalistic mysticism could serve parallel purposes for a New England vision of capturing a holy union out of the rubble of rival nationalisms, North and South.

The makers of the new mysticism were enabled as well to negotiate the intensification of religious diversity and to see it not as a threat to the solidity of Christian identity but as an opportunity for self-exploration and cross-cultural understanding. The expansion of mysticism as a cate-

gory, however naive about an underlying sameness and ecumenical har- mony, was a means of interreligious engagement—a sympathetic meet- ing point in an increasingly global encounter of religions. As a construct, universalized mysticism opened up conversations more than it foreclosed them through essentialism, becoming one of the key conceptual bridges that made possible innumerable religious crossings and contacts in the nineteenth century. Such cosmopolitan ferment was evident time and again in the diverse doings of the Transcendental Club (1836), the Free Religious Association (1867), the Theosophical Society (1875), the Harvard Club for the Study of the History of Religions (1891), and the World's Parliament of Religions (1893), as well as the Montsalvat School for the Comparative Study of Religion, founded by Sarah Farmer in Eliot, Maine, as part of her Green Acre community (1894). A dialogic model had governed Vaughan's foundational text for the configuration of the new mysticism, and it re- mained a standard resource into the 1880s and 1890s. His interlocutors chewed on different definitions, roamed across religious and cultural bor- ders, and seriously pondered philosophical critiques of religion, even as they romanticized the mystical. No doubt this modern construction of mysti- cism was part an Orientalist strategy of appropriation and part a vision of union solely on liberal Protestant terms, but it also served as a category to open up dialogic possibilities across cultures and traditions. The social, political, and theological conviction embedded in it was that the bridges of sympathy marked an improvement on the bombardments of colonialism and the boastings of Christian missiology. Clearly, mysticism, when imag- ined this way, erased difference, but it also dreamed of a common ground in a cultural domain filled with conflict and violence.

Still, the very openness of that interreligious exchange always had its limits, and the more freewheeling the conversation appeared, the more likely a critical retrenchment became. By the early twentieth century, many of the leading writers on mysticism—Rufus Jones, Evelyn Underhill, Cuth- bert Butler, James Pratt, Charles Addison, and John Wright Buckham, among others—were trying to sharpen their focus of study through draw- ing a sharp boundary between "normal" and "abnormal" experiences. For all the Romantic universalism upon which they built and notwithstand- ing James's psychical research, most of these writers wanted nothing to do with occultists, magi, clairvoyants, mediums, "weird psychical expe- riences," or "easy-going lotus eaters" (Butler: lxii, 3–4; Jones 1931: xii). Drawing that line became more of a fixation as theosophical and occultist claims on mysticism grew in force in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth- century Anglo-American culture (Dixon; Verter). Mysticism, Rufus Jones insisted, "does not mean something 'occult,' or 'esoteric,' or 'gnostic,' or 'pseudo-psychic'" (1927: 25). These scholars went to great rhetorical lengths

to insist that neither they nor the mystics they loved were Hermeticists and Theosophists in waiting. At the same time, Jones and company had little more than dismissive contempt for the somatic and visionary dimen- sions of devotional practices. Mysterious voices, strange sights, bodily oozings, and fleshly mortifications were freakish sideshows compared to an abstracted experience of divine union, an immediate consciousness of God's presence, or a contemplative intuition of the Absolute.7 Addison's analogy for disjoining normal from abnormal mysticism is especially tell- ing: "Homo-sexuality is not love. There is normal and abnormal love, and so there is a normal and an abnormal Mysticism" (30). The religious con- versations and cross-cultural exchanges that modern constructions of mysticism enabled were real, but they still came with very clear limits and sharply invidious comparisons.

The liberal construction of mysticism, if especially vulnerable in dis- claiming history and genealogy, actually produced works that were richly (if sometimes unwittingly) historical. Vaughan was an industrious col- lector of sources, as was Clarke, and a flood of new editions of mystical writers poured forth from the presses in the second half of the nineteenth century. At some level, the theoretical commitment to a timeless mysti- cism foundered on the diligent pursuit of the lives and writings of spe- cific mystics. To be sure, these inquirers often snared themselves in the bind of mysticism as monotony. As Charles Addison almost comically confessed, "When you see [mysticism] here or there, early or late, you feel perfectly at home with it. You say, 'Here is the same old thing.' It suffers a little, perhaps, from sameness" (150). And certainly the History of Re- ligions as a field of inquiry would as often as not be expressly antihistorical: "No mere inquiry into the genesis of a thing," Rudolf Otto would insist, "can throw any light upon its essential nature, and it is hence immaterial to us how mysticism historically arose" (22). Yet difference and history were both inescapable; even Addison emphasized how "very various" and "how different" mystics were across time and space (151). "There are no 'pure experiences,'" Jones observed point-blank in 1909; all are produced within a specific "social and intellectual environment" (1909: xxxiv). His- torical particularity proved inexorable and was often embraced outright. William Wallace Fenn, a liberal critic of liberalism's own exuberance and later dean of Harvard Divinity School, cautioned in 1897 of vain attempts

7 These body–spirit valuations, while common, were subsequently challenged and widely reversed, especially through the impact of such twentieth-century French thinkers as Lacan, Bataille, and Irigaray on feminist philosophy (Hollywood). Indeed, the very absence of the body in the liberal Protestant construction of mysticism invited its own inversion as the body has now become ever- more present in the study of mysticism.

"to construct a universal religion"; "the Messiah of universalism will ful- fill and not destroy the prophets of particularism" (201). He found all the talk of discovering through mysticism a grand "sympathy" among the world's religions to be "a huge cloud of thin but amiable sentiment be- fogging the intellect" (201).

Even on the vexed question of whether these liberal writers rendered mysticism ethically vapid and snugly privatized, the answer is again not so obvious. Frothingham's counsel that "genuine spirituality goes into the street" was to be taken seriously (1861: 229), and much of the liberal writ- ing on mysticism came to focus precisely on activism, on the "fusion of mystic communion with ethical passion" (Peabody: 476). William James himself, whose conceptions Jantzen characterizes as privatizing and do- mesticating, was actually energetically activist, impatient with any equa- tion of mysticism with a gospel of repose. Even a slightly more generous reading of James makes it clear that he was not bequeathing "mysticism" or "religious experience" as categories divorced from social ethics and public-mindedness. James's pragmatism sought, as he said, "to redeem religion from unwholesome privacy" and confer on it "public status" through scientific investigation (1982: 432–433). His consistent measure of religious experience was its fruits, its production of saintliness and active habits. James imagined mystical experience as a way to unleash energy, to find the hot place of human initiative and endeavor, and to en- courage the heroic, the strenuous, and the vital.

James had much company on this point. The Quaker Rufus Jones, who followed in James's footsteps and became one of the most prolific Ameri- can writers on mysticism, characterized mystics as "hundred-horsepower" men and "tremendous transmitters of energy" (1927: 52, 55). The mys- tics were the great athletes of the spirit. It would be ill conceived to think that James, Jones, and their wider liberal Protestant company domesti- cated, privatized, or feminized mysticism; instead, they did precisely the opposite. Gender, indeed, mattered deeply—but in the reverse of what Jantzen and other critics suspect. Margaret Fuller's dissenting voice not- withstanding, mysticism was not made "feminine" in these liberal circles but, rather, was rehabilitated on mostly "masculine" terms. Ascetically disciplined, visionary saints served, in James's express phrasing, as envi- able embodiments of "manlier indifference," "the more athletic trim," and "the moral fighting shape" and stood in contrast to the "effeminacy and unmanliness" of "our age" (1982: 365, 368). Hence Charles Addison's estimate of St. Francis: He was never weak but, rather, restlessly intense, "gentle indeed but virile" (113). Even Evelyn Underhill indulged in this rugged, muscular rhetoric; the mystics were "a race of adventurers," "he- roic examples" of the spiritual life (41).

On closer inspection, then, the argument that the modern categories of "religious experience" and "mysticism" were expressly aimed at puri- fying spirituality of the ostensible contaminants of political enmeshments and power relations does not hold up very well. Fuller heralded the emancipatory potential of mysticism for women; James sang the praises of saintly charity as a transformative social force; and Jones tirelessly in- sisted on the practical social implications of a revived mysticism, which he himself lived out in his dedication to the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Time and again, social-gospel Protestants were adamant about the insepa- rability of mysticism and political activism, religious experience and ar- duous saintliness, contemplation and efficiency, prayers and pickets. In his book Mysticism and Modern Life, published in 1915, Methodist John Wright Buckham made the connections to the social and industrial awak- ening explicit with his category of "social mysticism." Buckham drew a sharp line on this point: Active service to others was actually a require- ment to be considered under his tendentious heading "Normal Mysticism" (154, 244). From Unitarian Francis Peabody (who developed social eth- ics as a distinct field at Harvard Divinity School in the 1880s), to Felix Adler's disciple Stanton Coit (28–29), to Quaker Howard H. Brinton (5), the galvanizing concern was invariably "ethical mysticism." It is safe to say that the current desire to reconnect Christian spiritual practices and social justice, so evident in Jantzen's work itself, among others, is an ex- tension of liberal absorptions, not a correction of them (Jantzen; Ruffing). It is also safe to say that the "mystocentrism" of these various American interpreters cannot be linked to the production of what Wasserstrom has impugned within the History of Religions as "a monotheism without eth- ics" (5, 225–236).

Leaning too heavily on the recent critiques may only do historians more harm than good, for it effectively diverts attention from the exis- tential intensity of these liberal religious worlds that invested so much in mysticism. The construct mattered to its Jamesian devotees because of the despair it potentially assuaged, the questions of meaning it hoped to an- swer, the divided selves it tried to make whole, and the epiphanies it oc- casionally wrought. It requires neither protectiveness nor nostalgia to insist that the crises of belief and personal identity that haunted James and his wider circle deserve intensive historical engagement. Without the imme- diacy of James's question "Is life worth living?" without the religious yearn- ing and "quivering fear" in James's own breakdown, without the echo in his own father's confused and meandering faith, without the deadened emotions of James's philosophical melancholy, the historian is doomed to grope unseeingly in this religious culture (James 1982: 160; Levinson: 25–32). Historians need to grapple anew with the seriousness of these

narratives of desire in which mysticism holds primary interest as part of a search for a living experience of God. "I have no living sense of com- merce with a God," James wrote: "I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. . . . I have grown so out of Christianity that entanglement therewith on the part of a mystical utterance has to be abstracted from and overcome before I can listen. Call this, if you like, my mystical germ" (Pratt: 233–234). A canny awareness of "the politics of nostalgia" should not serve as an excuse to trivialize the quandaries that produced James's envy and necessitated his abstractions in the first place (McCutcheon 1997: 27–35).

In his Recollections, published in 1909, Washington Gladden, a titan among liberal Protestant thinkers and activists, tried to specify "the changes, which have taken place within the last sixty years in our conceptions of what is essential in religious experience" (38). He recalled "so many nights, when the house was still, looking out through the case- ment upon the unpitying stars, . . . a soul in great perplexity and trouble because it could not find God" (36). The loss of mystical experience had become "my problem," he reported, as he had come to live with a Chris- tianity without raptures, without "marked and easily recognizable emo- tional experience" (37–38). For James and those within the wider milieu of liberal Protestantism, the preserve of mysticism was only secondarily about protecting religion from its cultured despisers. It was primarily a construct formed of lacking and loss, an emptied space of longing for "a heightened, intensified way of life," a search for "an undivided whole of experience" in an increasingly fragmented world of serialized and alienated selves (Jones 1915: 161, 165). Rufus Jones commented in 1915 that he and his contemporaries were in the midst of "a profound revival of interest in Mysticism" but not "a distinct revival of Mysticism itself" (1915: 155). Previous revivals, he said, had been led by "luminous mystics" and "first-hand prophets of mystical religion," but this one was led by secondhand historians and psychologists, self-confessed (if reluctant) outsiders like William James (1915: 156–157). Charles Addison lamented that all of these modern treatments of mysticism, includ- ing James's, were "tremendously interesting" but that, alas, the dis- cussions were "mainly academic" (3). They "tend rather to make more intelligent the criticism of Mysticism than to make more Mystics" (Addison: 3).

Modern mysticism, as it was crafted from Vaughan and Frothingham to James and Jones, was a religious construct primarily made by seekers for seekers, for those who longed to be firsthand prophets but who mostly remained secondhand observers. "There are 'seekers' today in all lands," Jones noted, "who are keen and eager for fresh truth and new light on

mysticism" (1931: x). It was a small step from all these seekers of mysti- cism at the turn of the twentieth century to all those questers after spiri- tuality a century later. When Thomas Kelly, an academic philosopher turned Quaker devotionalist, remarked in 1940 that "we are all seekers," he was not so much an oracle prescient of the baby boomer generation (117). Instead, he looked back across a century of modern writers on mysticism who pointed the way toward a culture ever desirous of an elu- sive spirituality.

Scholarship, religious seeking, and modernity long intertwined. Whether that mixture of knowledge and desire makes illegitimate the learning of religious liberals or even the very birth of religious studies is not a par- ticularly fruitful framework for historical inquiry (Hart). That Henry Coventry has been all but forgotten, that Transcendentalist aspirations still hold considerable sway, that the "mystic heart" of "a universal spirituality" beats vibrantly on in the contemporary religious marketplace (Teasdale)— these might all serve as the occasion for a kind of reverse nostalgia for Enlightenment skepticism. Still, however present the past may be, history begins with acknowledgment of the pastness of the past, with the differ- ence of the dead, and that holds true whether the penetrating naturalism of Coventry or the poignant nostalgia of James is in view. History will not resolve the ambiguities of "religion" amid modernity, but it can attempt to display fully those complexities, not least the passions of shame and desire, estrangement and embrace, that long marked the relationship of religious liberals to their own invention, "mysticism."

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