

Introduction

Critical and Comparative Mysticisms

NAN GOODMAN

Of the two terms central to the organization and purpose of this issue on critical and comparative mysticisms, only the second offers familiar ground; the subject of comparative mysticisms and their associated religious traditions has a long history. From Robert Vaughan's nineteenth-century *Hours with the Mystics* to Jacques de Marquette's mid-twentieth-century *Introduction to Comparative Mysticism* to the recently published anthology *Comparative Mysticism*, edited by Steven T. Katz, mystical traditions have often been compared to each other across national, religious, and temporal lines—from the ancient to the modern era and from India to China to Europe, the Americas, and beyond.¹ Underlying these comparisons is an assumption that mystical traditions, which typically lie at the margins of more canonical religions, share a central feature—a drive toward the union of human and God. Often perceived to be outside the realm of culturally inflected rituals and texts that usually take the form of prescriptive doctrine, accessible rhetoric, or familiar institutional expressions, such as the church, synagogue, or mosque, mysticism seems to offer a largely self-similar panoply of goals and beliefs devoid of culturally specific markers. In fact, the tendency to explain mysticism by revealing comparisons among them implies that mysticism is somehow transcendent, defined not by the particular histories or philosophies that produced the texts and institutions of traditional religion but by the universal, creative, and in some cases somatic responses of human beings across the globe and over time.

If mysticisms are an assemblage of universal, intuitive, embodied, and above all ahistorical beliefs, however, we would do well to ask how they can also be critical. How, in other words, can universal mysticisms also serve as tools for opening up texts and exposing their particular approaches to the cultures and languages from which they emerged? More broadly, how can mysticism—often seen as religion's eccentric cousin—offer critical purchase on matters of intellectual concern, such as the reasons for the metaphysical trajectory of a given mystical tradition or the motivations of its authors?

In an interview by Eleanor Craig in this issue, Amy Hollywood offers a compelling answer to this question by casting doubt on the so-called objectivity of certain forms of nonmystical critical inquiry. According to Hollywood, inquiries

generated by the social or natural sciences that appear to be rational and critical may in the end yield answers that are no truer than, for example, a mystic's claim to hear the voice of God. Who's to say what's true and what's false, Hollywood asks, and why in the world should this be the only relevant question? Her approach to the critical potential of mysticism also invites us to consider not only the truths it may offer but its politically transformative nature as well, making a move that alters the terms of what we may find valuable in the study of mysticism from the start.

In a cluster of essays with Craig and Hollywood's discussion of critical mysticisms are two pieces, by Kris Trujillo and Rachel Smith, that make up the first section of this issue. Both of these essays ponder the critical potential of mysticism in ways inspired by Hollywood's work. Trujillo shows us how in the novel *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario* (*The Virtues of the Solitary Bird*), about the AIDS epidemic and Saint John of the Cross, the contemporary Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo wrestles with the seeming contradictions between creativity, associated with mysticism, and critique, associated with intellection and cognition. For Goytisolo, who fears the destructive influence of critique on his creative work, Saint John of the Cross represents a pure and uncritical creativity, but in a radically new reading of the novel, Trujillo reveals how, despite Goytisolo's best efforts, the novel's uses of Saint John of the Cross escape the rigid divide between critique and creativity and return the novel to a place in which creativity and, by extension, mysticism can rightfully reclaim their own critical structures and interests.

In Smith's essay on medieval Christianity, we discover a similar approach to critique and creativity in the context of the traditional distinction between affirmative and negative religious practices. In this essay the customary divide between practices associated with traditional religion—such as the reading of canonical texts and prayer, which are understood to be affirmative and potentially critical acts—and those associated with mysticism, such as meditation, which are often taken to be acts of uncritical negation, largely dissolves. For Smith, the affirmative acts of narrative repetition and internalization have much more in common with the mystical practices of self-negation and union with God than previously thought. The injunction in a text central to the *Rule of Benedict*, for example, to read the Psalms not simply as if they were written by a prophet but “as if they were his own utterances and his own (*proprium*) prayer” serves as a perfect example for Smith of how ostensibly self-affirming and self-negating practices share goals and methodologies.

Setting the stage for the rest of the issue, this first cluster of essays on critical mysticisms invites us to read the category of mysticism in the essays in the second section as legitimate and productive forms of knowledge and critique by realigning the mystical quest for knowledge with other forms of knowledge but without eliding the differences among them. Some elements of this realignment rely on a post-Enlightenment perspective in which various modes of thought and inquiry formerly thought to be objective are found to be just as immersive and devotional as various modes of mystical inquiry. The essays in the second section then ask us to reconsider our own innate tendencies to persuade ourselves of certain truths in the service of critique so that we can more readily locate them in our texts, events, and experiences. These essays demonstrate how little we know about which comes first

in our thought processes, fact or perception. They also reveal how untrustworthy our assumptions are that mystical modes of thought necessarily defy rational cognition. After all, the mysticisms in all three monotheistic traditions under examination here—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish—are made up of the same definitions, examples, and historicity that have long been associated with logical thought and expression.

Bernard McGinn's essay about Teresa of Ávila anchors the second section's essays about mysticism as critique. McGinn returns us to what is perhaps the *sina qua non* of the divide between the rational and the mystical in Christian theology—the contemplative versus the active life. Long believed to be oppositional ends of Christian practice, the active and the contemplative come together in McGinn's description of the last fifteen years of Teresa of Ávila's life in which, after earlier claims about the superiority of the contemplative, she devoted herself to the *vita activa* and to the productive blurring of the lines between the secluded insular life of the mystic and the more politically and socially engaged believer.

The difference between the active and the contemplative, which reaches back to the origins of Christianity, if not before, is reformulated in the next contribution, by Zvi Ish-Shalom. In his essay on Kedumah, a mystical path he devised himself, Ish-Shalom outlines what is essentially a nonmystical mysticism. For Ish-Shalom, Kedumah speaks directly to the development of one of the essential aspects of a critical mysticism: the penetration of mystical practices into everyday life and the turning of mystical thought into social action and resistance. Ish-Shalom explores the predominantly nonmystical aspects of our lives: our tendency to identify with and sustain our surface identities, including identities associated with our occupations or family and the surprising potential those tendencies have for bringing us to a deeper wisdom. Significantly, Ish-Shalom's essay also performs the important work of breaking down the barriers between theory and praxis by combining them in a piece of writing that is part scholarly explanation and part mystical guide.

To see mysticism as a possible form of critique also invites us to revisit the more familiar term in the issue's title—*comparative*. Sometimes, as the history of comparative mysticism has shown, comparison shows difference in the service of sameness. We have an example of this in Ahmet Cem Durak's exploration of the Jewish influences on the work of Abdülvasi Çelebi, a medieval Ottoman Islamic scholar. For Durak, however, who traces the origins of the story of Abraham as it was told in the Sufi tradition to a particular Jewish text, the payoff of comparison lies in those places where parts of the Hebrew Bible and midrashic stories about Abraham surface and recede in the Islamic text to reveal an interactive Jewish-Islamic tradition. Other comparisons among the essays in this section focus more on the similarities and influences of one mystical tradition on another, one example of which we find in Marsha Keith Schuchard's essay on Freemasonry in the Anglo-American world and the Cabala (Kabbalah). Instead of only showing the unidirectional reliance of Freemasonry on the Cabala, however, Schuchard, who grounds her exploration of the Cabalistic roots of British Freemasonry in the work of Jonathan Swift, reveals Swift's simultaneous and multidirectional ridicule and celebration of the obfuscating methods of the Cabala in his satirical techniques. A

third example of comparison less well known in traditional comparative methods but present in some of the essays here reveals the uncontainable nature of mystical narratives as they circulate over the centuries, incorporating fragments from other narrative traditions as well as becoming assimilated into them. Pavel V. Basharin's essay on the justification of Satan's existence in the Islamic tradition ranges freely over a number of narrative genres and figures belonging not only to biblical or mystical traditions but also to folklore and magic.

Regardless of their approach to comparison, however, what ties all of the essays in this section together is that they deploy comparison not to define mysticism as such but to use one instantiation of mysticism as a way of asking methodological questions about another. In her essay on Neoplatonism, charity, and love, Sarah Pessin introduces us to the possibilities of instrumentalizing "the Christian mystery of kenosis"—the concept of "the self-emptying of God"—by suggesting that she is thinking with kenosis. For Pessin, it appears, thinking with kenosis is not only a process she is attempting to understand but a description of the way she may go about understanding it. Untangling the complex concepts of presence and absence and what she ultimately calls a kenosis without kenosis, Pessin reminds us of the extraordinary parallels between mysticism and philosophy, even though the latter is often considered respectable and the former is often degraded or shunned.

History also plays a central role in thinking about mysticism as a critical enterprise. In an essay in which he calls the notion of an ahistorical mysticism a modern creation, Leigh Eric Schmidt insists on the historicization of the ahistorical in this context. "[The] departicularized form [of mysticism]," he writes, "needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity. If the concepts that this liberal, Transcendentalist culture bequeathed now seem threadbare or worse, it nonetheless behooves us to reenter that religious world to see what negotiations animated these constructs in the first place."² Following Schmidt's lead in her examination of one of the germinal texts in Jewish mysticism, the *Sefer Bahir*, Marla Segol reveals how attending to the various plumbing techniques available at different times during the *Sefer Bahir's* composition can help us pinpoint where it was composed and reveal how intertwined mystical texts were with the material culture around them. Correlating certain plumbing and water flow technologies with certain portions of the text allows Segol to shed light on the poetic properties of the text's water imagery, ultimately offering us a new, woman-centered reading of a difficult and traditionally masculinized mystical text. In this case, the historical, material context that is so often occluded in studies of the mystical helps us understand the *Sefer Bahir* analytically and affectively, once again bringing the critical and the creative closer together.

Similarly, in Nathan Wolski's essay on the *Zohar*, a late thirteenth-century Jewish mystical text, history is used to comment on the intersection of material and metaphysical culture. In his description of phosphenes—the appearance of light caused by the application of light pressure on the eyeballs—Wolski opens up a number of passages in the *Zohar* that describe the stages of ascent through prayer to a mystical union with God. The essay offers an unusual description of the somatology of the mystical body and thus provides in Wolski's terms some of the "raw" data of

the visual experience being described. On another level, however, it also serves as a bridge from the internal to the external world and reshapes our understanding of the mind as material and metaphysical at the same time.

Although Wolski's essay revolves primarily around mystical practices, it also invites us to think about the uses of language in a number of contexts—the traditionally religious, mystical, rational, and secular. Manuella Ceballos takes up the uses of language as a path into mystical thought in her essay on Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples âmes* (*Mirror of Simple Souls*), a thirteenth-century Christian mystical text that paradoxically uses language to talk about the insufficiency of language. Her book and body burned, Marguerite, Ceballos argues, wrote about God in a way that demonstrated the semantic, symbolic, and phenomenological features of language all at once. Marguerite, according to Ceballos, understood that language was as conducive to the articulation of silence and the ineffable nature of God in the mystical union as any other medium and so wrote herself into and out of her text. Most important, perhaps, the language Marguerite used functions as another affirmation of the extension of mysticism across texts, demonstrating that mysticism can be both a reading and a writing practice that can crop up outside mystical texts as such.

The third section of this issue is devoted to a wide-ranging series of position papers presented at the Mediterranean Seminar Spring Workshop on Mysticism and Devotion held at the University of Colorado Boulder on April 21–22, 2017. The Mediterranean Seminar, an interdisciplinary forum for the promotion and development of Mediterranean-oriented teaching and research directed by Brian Catlos (University of Colorado Boulder) and Sharon Kinoshita (University of California, Santa Cruz), holds quarterly workshops on various themes at participating institutions. The spring 2017 workshop, “Mysticism and Devotion,” was developed in conjunction with the programming on mysticism of the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder as well as the conceptualization of this issue. The position papers revised and edited for this issue were responses by roundtable presenters to one of the following three questions: “Mysticism and Doctrine: Are They Compatible or Do They Conflict?”; “Do Mystical Traditions Have a Politics?”; and “Mediterranean Religion: Does It Function as a Category?” These papers provide brief but vibrant interventions on the subject of mysticisms, comparative and critical, and close out the issue in a way that I hope demonstrates a wider applicability of the mystical and a more discernible articulation of the ineffable than we have encountered before. Mysticism, as this issue demonstrates, can and should enter into a variety of scholarly discourses from which it has previously been excluded so it can help us ask more incisive questions about how to talk about the religious and the secular, the intellectual and the intuitive, without ignoring the truths that mysticism provides.

NAN GOODMAN is director of the Program in Jewish Studies and professor in the Jewish Studies Program and the English Department at the University of Colorado Boulder. She is author of *Shifting the Blame: Literature, Law, and the Theory of Accidents* (1998); *Banished: Common Law and the Rhetoric of Social Exclusion* (2012); and *The Puritan Cosmopolis: The*

Law of Nations and the Early American Imagination (2018). She has also coedited "Juris-Dictions," a special issue of *ELN* (2010); *The Turn around Religion in America: Literature, Culture, and the Work of Sacvan Bercovitch* (2011); and *The Routledge Research Companion to Law and Humanities in Nineteenth-Century America* (2017).

Notes

- 1 See Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics*; Marquette, *Introduction to Comparative Mysticism*; and Katz, *Comparative Mysticism*.
- 2 Schmidt, "Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" 275.

Works Cited

- Katz, Steven T., ed. *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Marquette, Jacques de. *Introduction to Comparative Mysticism*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.
- Schmidt, Leigh Eric. "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism.'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003): 273–302.
- Vaughan, Robert. *Hours with the Mystics: A Contribution to the History of Religious Opinion*. London, 1856.