



“Love will not be idle”

Non-Doing and Action in the English Mystical Tradition

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ABSTRACT This essay explores the dynamic of contemplative action, which I will refer to as ‘social mysticism’, or what from the perspective of comparative mysticism we might also want to term a form of ‘non-doing’. It focuses primarily on the medieval English mystical tradition, illustrating that two forms of action are discussed—ordinary actions and those which flow out of contemplation. It is noted that the latter constitute a detached form of action. To draw out the full ramifications of social mysticism within a Christian context a short coda is added that considers mysticism in the writings of three twentieth-century anglophone writers, all of whom were strongly influenced by medieval Christian mysticism. The essay sets out to show that focusing on the relationship between mysticism and action raises questions concerning the extent to which ineffability offers the most useful marker for Christian mysticism.

KEYWORDS Mysticism, social action, Medieval English Mysticism, Theology

Introduction

This essay explores the dynamic of contemplative action, which I will refer to as ‘social mysticism,’ or what from the perspective of comparative mysticism we might also want to term a form of ‘non-doing.’ It focuses primarily on the medieval English mystical tradition. While medieval English mysticism has traditionally been associated with five indigenous writers who produced work in Middle English in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—Richard Rolle (d. 1349), Walter Hilton (d. 1396), the anonymous *Cloud*-Author (late fourteenth century), Julian of Norwich (b. ca. 1342) and Margery Kempe (d. ca. 1438)—as Nicholas Watson has pointed out, this grouping has not only produced a false sense of their homogeneity, it has also obscured the relationship between their thought and broader literary trends (1999, 539). Until recently, it has led scholars to ignore indigenous writers, like the Monk of Farne (fourteenth century), who wrote solely in Latin, as well as many mainland European mystical works that were translated into Middle English and often substantially modified for their new [1]

audiences—such as Marguerite Porete’s (d. 1310) *Le miroir des âmes simples et anéanties et qui seulement demuerent en coulor et désir d’amour* (The Mirror of Simple Souls), translated as *þe Myroure of Symples Soules*, and Mechthild of Hackeborne’s (d. 1298) *Liber Specialis Gratia* (Book of Special Grace), translated as *The Boke of Gostlye Grace*. In this essay, where the English mystical tradition is concerned, I will refer to a range of Latin and Middle English mystical works, indigenous texts as well as vernacular translations.¹

Medieval English devotion and its mystical tradition are deeply ascetic in orientation [2] (MacMillan 2017). Although some hermits in medieval England were responsible for taking care of bridges and building roads (Jones 2019, 107, 112), hermits who dedicated their lives to contemplation worked in an external manner only through the production of writings.² This eremitic practice was also central to the Carthusian Order, which was largely responsible for copying and preserving such writings. Only Margery Kempe combined mysticism and public life, although the extent to which she engaged in social mysticism is open to question. Therefore, having explored the sense in which these mystical writers promoted social mysticism by way of coda, I will turn briefly to four twentieth-century Anglophone accounts of social mysticism—those of Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), William James (1842–1910), Howard Thurman (1899–1981), and Thomas Merton (1915–1968), all of whom were steeped in medieval Christian mysticism—to tease out further what social mysticism looks like in a Christian context. Focusing on the relationship between mysticism and action raises questions concerning the extent to which both individual and solitary existence, and the related notion of ineffability, provide us with the most useful markers of Christian Mysticism. This will become apparent as we move through the various case studies considered in this essay. It is a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

First, we need to unpack what is intended by the expression ‘social mysticism.’ At the heart [3] of Thomas Traherne’s (ca. 1636–1674) poetry is what Stan Smith calls “a fruitful paradox,” one that holds “that each individual consciousness is,” to quote Traherne, “‘the sole heir of the whole world’ precisely because each contains all the others” (Smith 1999, 68). Or at least, notes Smith, this is how the late twentieth-century poet and biographer Edward Thomas (1978–1917) reads the seventeenth-century English poet, mystic and Anglican clergyman Traherne. For Thomas, the mystic Traherne is “the true ‘public mind,’” for whom individual joy leads not to solipsism but to an awareness of the other and our responsibility to love them. As he stresses, quoting Traherne:

“The world,” he [Traherne] says in another place, “does serve you, *not only* as it is the place and receptacle of all *your* joys, but as it is a *great obligation laid upon all mankind*, and upon every person in all ages, to love you as himself; as it also *magnifieth all your companions*.” (Thomas 1903; quoted in Smith 1999, 68) [4]

Thomas calls this ‘social mysticism’ (Smith 1999, 68). The impulse that Thomas so neatly [5] captures in this phrase is not one often associated with mystical thought. Indeed, in the seventeenth century, mysticism came to be associated with Quietism. Remarking that Quietism is a rather nebulous movement, Bernard McGinn notes that “[w]ith some justification the Quietists were often accused of denigrating, perhaps even denying, the value of external works,

1 The work has been conducted with reference to the original languages, but in the interest of the wide readership of *Entangled Religions*, English translations are used throughout.

2 It can rightly be argued that prayer is a form of work, but a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses on external actions and on the relationship of these to internal actions, such as prayer, rather than internal actions *per se*.

even the pursuit of virtuous action” (2021, 7–8). McGinn argues that the Quietists exaggerated and misconstrued tenets of Christian mysticism. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the centrality of what he terms ‘quietist tendencies’ within mainstream Christian mystical thought (2021, 6). These include the promotion of passivity and silence, inner prayer, being overwhelmed by pure love, and renouncing or rejecting virtue. These traits have often been associated with mainland European mystics, such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Marguerite Porete, and Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381). McGinn posits that they are present across the tradition, even in the influential writings Pseudo-Dionysius (late fifth–early sixth century). They are also found in the English mystical tradition to which Traherne was heir.

Of course, this essay is not the first to notice the limitations of a focus on ineffability and individualism where mysticism is concerned. Steven T. Katz’ ground-breaking critique of the modern study of mysticism rejects ineffability as mysticism’s primary focus (1978, 25) and stresses too that individualism is far from the whole picture of mysticism, particularly Christian mysticism (1992a, 1992b). As he puts it with reference to mysticism’s impact on wider issues of social justice, which he refers to here as ‘ethics’:

Ethics and mysticism, we are regularly instructed, are if not antithetical, then certainly, at the very least, unrelated. This common wisdom is predicated on a specific understanding of morality and a flawed, though widespread, conception of mysticism and mystical traditions. It is yet another distorted and distorting manifestation of the still more universal misapprehension that mystics are essentially arch-individualists, “Lone Rangers” of the spirit, whose sole intention is to escape the religious environments that spawned them in order to find personal liberation or salvation. (Katz 1992a, 253)

As Katz stresses here, rather than viewing mystics as ‘Lone Rangers’—the subtext being that earlier critics assumed this to be the case on the grounds that their experiences were by definition ineffable—close textual analysis of the reports of mystical experiences reveal ethical, religious and social concerns that tie the experiences of the mystics into the wider societies of which they were part. This undermines the notion that their experiences are fully ineffable, and also that mysticism is antithetical to solving social problems and ethical dilemmas.

Discussion of those texts that are now viewed as accounts of ‘mysticism’ regained academic respectability in the early twentieth century, when the modern notion of mysticism was developed by theorists such as Evelyn Underhill and William James. The latter has had a widespread and sustained influence within the academia in the West, especially within an Anglophone context. According to James, mystical experiences or, as he refers to them, ‘states of consciousness’ are, by their very nature, indescribable, and as such ineffable experiences. He is therefore reticent to attribute to them any communal authority. As he puts it in summary form in one of his two seminal essays on ‘Mysticism’:

(1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and *have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.* (2) *No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.* (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility

of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith. (James 2011, 422–23)

As James stresses here, despite offering access to what he considers a true and alternative mode of consciousness, mystical experiences carry absolute authority for no one other than the recipient. Indeed, as he remarks slightly earlier in the same essay, the energy that mystical consciousness brings can be counter-productive if its source of inspiration is underpinned by errors (2011, 415). Yet despite this caution, and his often-critical treatment of Teresa of Avila in his lecture on ‘Saintliness’ (2011, 346–47), James nonetheless praises both Teresa and Ignatius of Loyola for putting their mystical transformational experiences into societal action. This reveals a tension at the heart of James’ account to which I will return at the close of this essay. As I discuss there, James’ thinking, and that of others, such as Underhill, on the relationship between mysticism and action has been overlooked. Indeed, while Katz’ position on mysticism differs markedly from that of James, there is more commonality than immediately apparent when considering the idea that it does a disservice to mystical writers to divorce them entirely from their wider traditions. This comes to the fore when we consider the relationship between mysticism and action. [11]

However, it seems important to emphasise that Christian mystics are not much interested in action *per se*, which they consider a less elevated activity than contemplation or mysticism (two terms that will be used interchangeably, see McIntosh 1998, 11).³ What truly interests Christian mystics is what we might call contemplative action, that is, the kind of action that flows out of mystical union.⁴ As the twelfth-century Victorine Richard of St Victor states in his short treatise *De quatuor gradibus violentae caritatis* (The Four Degrees of Violent Love), this is the pinnacle of the mystical life. Richard differentiates between the third and fourth degrees of love. The former signals the total submission of the will to God, an event which Richard describes using numerous biblical allusions and citations—the old man has passed away, the new has come, the soul is transfigured, it melts into God—remoulded as though by a refiner’s fire. However, it is the fourth degree that is arguably the culmination of contemplation. Richard equates it with action in the world that ‘flows out’ of individual unitive experience. As William Pollard stresses, the fourth degree of love “[...] manifests itself in outward acts of satisfaction; it is the goad which moves a languishing lover to communicate the other stages of divine love to his or her fellow Christians, [...it] commissions the contemplative to teach others” (1997, 91). Richard compares the third degree to pregnancy and the fourth to giving birth, a metaphor which surely indicates that the fourth is not a diminution of the third, but its fruition (Richard of St Victor 2011, 26.286, however, see Kraebel, in 2011). [12]

In his discussions of Gregory of Nyssa’s fourth-century Greek *Commentarius in Canticum* [13]

3 Of course, it could be argued that this essay offers us reason to disentangle ‘contemplation’ from ‘mysticism’ rather than continuing to conflate these terms. The majority of the texts discussed here were written prior to the first use of the term ‘mysticism,’ which appears to have emerged in the sixteenth century but entered Anglophone academic discourse in its current form in the late nineteenth century. It is therefore a neologism that one might argue is not fit for purpose. I hope to demonstrate that the emphasis on individualism and ineffability that continues to mark much contemporary discussion of ancient mystical texts is indeed misplaced. Yet what is being argued for here is a reform of the notion of ‘mysticism’ *tout court*, and for this reason I have chosen to use it synonymously with ‘contemplation’ in line with wider usage in the field. A further consideration in an interdisciplinary journal of this nature is the practical one that ‘mysticism’ provides a more familiar access point than ‘contemplation’ to the materials under discussion, despite the many problems that beset the taxonomy of ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystics’, etc.

4 This is not to suggest that certain ordinary actions, such as prayer and engaging in the liturgy, cannot themselves be preparatory for mystical union. My goal here is however to discuss a different kind of action, one that is driven by mystical union.

canticorum (Homilies on the Song of Songs), Martin Laird identifies a similar mode of action that arises from out of the silence of contemplation, one that he claims is apophatic in tone. As Laird puts it:

as a result of apophatic union, in which concepts, words and images have been abandoned, characteristics of the Word are taken on: the Word indwells the deeds and discourse of the one in apophatic union. Hence a new mode of discourse emerges: the Word says itself [...]. (Laird 2001, 2) [14]

Laird terms this state ‘logophasis.’ Although Laird’s neologism initially met with a mixed reaction (Ludlow 2006; Wallace 2011, 311n78; however, cf. Maspero 2011, 274), Timothy D. Knepper has recently suggested that rather than being the culmination of the mystical journey, the silence into which the Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius falls at the end of his *Mystical Theology* is likewise better understood as preparation for action. In his case, it signals an appreciation of the deep significance of liturgical and sacramental symbols, such as the Eucharist (2014, 83). The authors of scriptures—particularly St Paul, the Gospel writers, and the author of the Songs of Songs—encapsulate this dynamic for Gregory. He reads St Paul as the archetypal mystic, who out of the mystical encounter that raised him up to the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12.2–4), operated in the world in ways that were more than human. As Laird puts it:

As Paul inhales the divine fragrance he is transformed through indwelling union into a vehicle of the Word itself; his deeds and discourse become vehicles of divine presence [...] Paul’s announcement of the gospel is also a vehicle of indwelling communion with the Word. Through Paul the Word brings itself, expresses itself. (Laird 2007, 161) [16]

This is as much as to suggest that God so moves within St Paul that his actions and words are not the product of human striving—a point which Richard of St Victor similarly makes when he speaks of a reconfigured self that is “almost entirely more than human” (2011, 47.296). [17]

It is this idea that Thomas so neatly sums up in his phrase ‘social mysticism,’ holding together the individual unitive encounter with action in the world in ways that imply that the latter is predicated on the former. This notion does not seem a million miles away from aspects of the concept of ‘non-doing’ in Daoism and similar thinking on non-action in other Eastern traditions (Jain and Kripal 2009). Discussing the concept of *wuwei* or ‘non-doing’ in the Daoist writings of Laozi, Sam Mickey quotes Laozi’s *Daodejing* (The Book of the Way and Its Virtue): “Act but through nonaction / Be active, but have no activities” (quoted in Mickey 2019, 7). He argues that *wuwei* “is consistent with the Daoist idea of a person who acts without action, doing ‘non-doing’” (Mickey 2019, 7). In relation to another Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi* (The Writings of Zhuang), Mickey notes that ‘non-doing’ can even operate at the level of political engagement in society. This essay aims to illustrate that a comparable, though not identical, trait exists within Christian mysticism. [18]

Social Mysticism or ‘Non-Doing’ in the Medieval English Mystical Tradition

Richard Rolle on Mystical Action and the Mystic’s Ability to Act in the World

The Middle English mystic who most overtly deals with the topic of social mysticism is Richard Rolle. In his thought we find a clear distinction between mystical and ordinary action, with the later firmly rejected in favour of the former in ways that involve not only inner dispositions but also the body and its actions in the world. Rolle was a hermit in the North of England in the early fourteenth century who dropped out of Oxford University to pursue an ascetic and mystical life. His writings proved exceptionally popular. As Ralph Hanna has commented: “Rolle was, hands down, the most widely-read late medieval English writer, as witnessed by surviving copies and references” (2016, 228). His Latin texts *Incendium Amoris* (The Fire of Love) and *Emendatio Vitae* (The Mending of Life)—part of a large Latin corpus—circulated widely on the Continent and were translated into Middle English. Near the end of his life, he also produced a number of treatises and short texts in Middle English for a female audience, including a Middle English Psalter. One of Rolle’s idiosyncratic traits is his insistence on sitting in an environment free from distractions: “Sitting alone apart from the tumult but glorifying Christ, he [the mystic] burns and loves, rejoices and sings” (1991, 60). He records being criticised for moving cells in order to inhabit an environment better suited to contemplation and stresses the need for solitude in order to quieten the heart (1981, 141). The emphasis on sitting is unique to Rolle amongst the English mystics, as is his insistence that mystical union is encountered through three experiences—heat, sweetness and song. The particularly significant feature of these experiences is that they affect not only the soul but also the body, suggesting that Rolle holds the human person to have only one sensorium that processes both physical and spiritual sensations. For example, he writes of his first experience of heat:

I was more amazed than I can put into words when, for the first time, I felt my heart glow hot and burn. I experienced the burning not in my imagination but in reality, as if it were being done by a physical fire. But I was really amazed by the way the burning heat boiled up in my soul and (because I had never before experienced this abundance), by the unprecedented comfort it brought. In fact, I frequently felt my chest to see if this burning might have some external cause! (Rolle 1981, 145) [20]

As a consequence of their physicality and the soul having only one sensorium, such sensations replace rather than stand beside other daily experiences. The downside of this is that ordinary human experiences and actions can pose a threat to the contemplative encounter. Early in his mystical career, Rolle writes of not only avoiding noisy environments but any activities that might attract his affections away from loving God. For this reason, he states that he stopped going to church and singing the liturgy, [21]

[This is] why I fled the singers in churches and by what reason I have not loved to mix myself with them, and why I have taken to not listening to people playing the organ. For these things produced an impediment by the pleasantness of their sound, and forced those most brilliant of songs to fail. (Rolle 1981, 214–15) [22]

Yet Rolle contrasts such beginners with perfect contemplatives. The former, he states, need [23]

to flee the world. The latter, however, are able to retain contemplative union even while operating within it, even if some of the delight that the contemplative normally encounters is lessened. As he states,

Stabilized men are such that they cannot be distracted by any clamor or tumult, or by any other thing whatsoever, from prayer or meditation, but through such things they are separated only from their song. [... that] certain among the singers or psalmodizers are distracted in their devotion is not from perfection but from instability of mind (*instabilitate mentis*), because the words of others interrupt and confuse their prayers, a thing that certainly does not befall the perfect. (Rolle 1981, 214–15)

[24]

As we can see from these passages, the key difference in terms of action is the attainment of stability. Rolle makes clear that this is mental stability, in which one's mind does not wander from loving God even when confronted with worldly affairs and actions. In his corpus, he details several techniques to overcome instability, the most prominent of which involves keeping the name of Jesus always in mind and reciting it like a mantra. Rolle states that this allows him to overcome demonic attacks, like that which he confronted when it seemed as though a beautiful woman had climbed into bed with him in his cell:

[25]

I thought that not a woman but a devil in the form of a woman was there tempting me. Therefore I turned to God and with him in my mind, I said “O Jesus, how precious is your blood,” pressing the cross onto my breast with my finger, which now could move a little, and, behold, suddenly all disappeared and I gave thanks to God, who freed me. Afterwards I sought to love Jesus, and the more I advanced in his love, the more the name Jesus was tasting sweetly and pleasantly to me, and indeed it has not receded from me up to this day. Therefore blessed be the name Jesus forever and ever. (Murray 1958, 106–7)

[26]

This rather offensive misogynistic story, coupled with the emphasis that Rolle places on the need for mental stability, indicates a debt to Christian Desert Spirituality, which is most clearly theorised in the thought of the fourth-century ascetic monk, Evagrius Ponticus (344–399), who wrote extensively about the spirituality of the Egyptian desert (Casiday 2006, 3). Evagrius' ideas were transmitted to the Latin West through the writings of Cassian (Fulton Brown 2000, 156), with sayings from the Desert Fathers also circulating in England in the later Middle Ages (Hanna 1987). Central to Evagrius' spirituality are the related concepts of *antirhētikos* (Greek αντιαιρετικός, talking back) and *apatheia* (Greek ἀπάθεια, calming the wandering mind). In order to tease out why I hold Rolle to be engaging in a form of social mysticism, a brief excursus into Evagrius' thinking on this topic is required.

[27]

Mysticism and Contemplative Action in Desert Spirituality

The practice of *antirhētikos* is directed toward dealing with those external forces which in the case of ascetics tend to attack the mind with *logismoi* (Greek λογίσμοι). This can be translated as unwholesome thoughts or images, or what we might also call proto-passions. The notion of proto-passions is something that finds its origins in Stoic thinking. Richard Sorabji finds in Stoic thought a difference between proto-passions and passions, or emotions proper. Those who experienced proto-passions are not considered to have sinned. Only by consenting, and so

[28]

experiencing passions, is blame incurred (Sorabji 2000, 343). The Early Church Fathers Origen and Didymus the Blind imported this idea into Christianity. Both hold, for example, that Jesus only experienced proto-passions or ‘first movements,’ not passion proper, and therefore was not a sinner (2000, 344), while Judas acted on a first movement and sinned. Evagrius, building on this teaching, argues that the ascetic needs to develop discernment when confronted with mental images and thoughts. Evagrius holds that there is nothing that one can do to prevent thoughts and images from entering into the mind, what matters is what one does about them. Ascetics are counselled to pay attention to their thoughts, to watch them in a detached manner, to gain a sense of how and when unwelcome thoughts encroach and pose a danger. As Evagrius puts it in his *Praktikos* (The Monk):

If there is any monk who wishes to take measure of some of the more fierce demons so as to gain experience in his monastic art, then let him keep careful watch over his thoughts. Let him observe their intensity, their periods of decline and follow them as they rise and fall. Let him note well the complexity of his thoughts, their periodicity, the demons which cause them, with the order of their succession and the nature of their associations. Then let him ask from Christ the explanations of these data he has observed. (Evagrius Ponticus 1972, 50.30) [29]

Evagrius offers several methods in order to prevent unwelcome thoughts from taking hold in the ascetic’s mind and doing lasting damage. Attributing them to demon assault, he recommends particular verses from the Bible to combat different temptations. Although David Brakke (Evagrius Ponticus 2009) has suggested that biblical phrases are being attributed an almost magic quality in demonic warfare, Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) stresses that such words work because Jesus acts through them on one’s behalf. This point is also made by Evagrius in his *Praktikos*, where he stresses: “you have been brought into apatheia by the mercy of Christ” (1972, 33). As Michael J. Pilato clarifies, [30]

The spiritual technique Evagrius encourages the reader to engage in here is to repeatedly recollect Christ as the source of the ascetical/mystical experience of unity with God in the state of dispassion. This purity requires the emptying of the prideful mind and placing the attainment of apatheia in God’s activity alone. (Pilato 2014, 48) [31]

Even though *antirhētikos* is in some sense a fairly lowly spiritual practice, it nonetheless has a connection to apatheia, that is, the attainment of a calm mind, an elevated contemplative state. John Eudes Bamberger notes that, for Evagrius, apatheia is “the key-stone of his whole structure of ascetic practice” (Bamberger in Evagrius Ponticus 1972, lxxxii). This would seem to be confirmed when in *On Thoughts*, Evagrius writes that: [32]

The mind could not see *the place of God* in itself, unless it had become loftier than all [concepts] from things. But it would not become loftier, unless it had put off the passions that bind it to perceptible things through concepts. It will put aside the passions through virtues: it will put aside the base thoughts through contemplation; it will even put aside contemplation itself, when there appears to it that light at the time of prayer which sets in relief *the place of God*. (Evagrius Ponticus 2006, 40, my emphasis) [33]

In order to enter into God’s presence, Evagrius stresses that the mind must have been calmed. [34] He suggests that one’s success can be measured by how one responds to such thoughts when asleep. Those who have achieved *apatheia* will find their minds untroubled and will rise up and strike them down in anger (Evagrius Ponticus 2006, 109)—almost acting while doing nothing—a principle which Rolle’s story of overcoming the woman/demon when sleeping is likely meant to illustrate since he awakes and engages in combat through mantra-like recitation of the name of Jesus, i.e., through repeated recollection of Christ. With this brief outline in mind, we return to the dynamic of social mysticism within Rolle’s writings.

Rolle on Contemplative Action

Rolle continually stresses the importance of keeping one’s mind focused on Jesus through [35] various meditations and prayers in a manner analogous with the practice of *antirhētikos*. *Incendium Amoris* and Rolle’s late Middle English work, *The Form of Living*, which was composed in 1348 for Margaret Kirkby shortly before his death, both actively stress the importance of focusing one’s mind on Jesus. He states that this will enable one to engage in worldly/ecclesial affairs without spiritual distraction. As he puts it in *Incendium Amoris*,

We are able, certainly, if we are true lovers of our Lord Jesus Christ, both to [36] meditate on Him while we go on, and to hold on to the song of His love while we go on, and to hold on to the song of His love while we sit in the assembly, and we shall be able to keep the memory of Him at his table, even in the very tastes of food and drink. But we ought to praise God for every little morsel of food or every small cup of drink, and among the intervals of the acceptance of nourishment and of small morsels, we ought to resound these praises with honeyed sweetness and spiritual cry and desire. We ought to pant toward Him in the midst of feasts. And if we should be engaged in manual labor, what prevents us from raising our heart to heavenly things and from retaining the thought of eternal love without ceasing? And thus at every time of our life we should be burning with fervor, not torpid; nor will anything remove our heart from this love, except for sleep [...] But in the meantime, you shall valiantly overcome all attacks of demons [...]. (Rolle 1981, 250–51, cf. 1988b, 15.510–16.519)

From this passage, it does not seem that Rolle is speaking of fully-attained *apatheia*, or [37] what he elsewhere refers to in this work as a Christlike mind, recording how “Christ did not have wandering thoughts [...] because from the very start of His conception He saw God most clearly” (1981, 170). He stresses that Christ experienced no conflict between mind and body such as we find in many visions of the afterlife. Christ did not have an out of body experience when in union with God—rather the two elements, body and mind, always worked in harmony in his everyday life. Rolle claims to have attained something similar, a point evidenced by a capacity to be in the company of women but experience no temptation (1981, 201, see 134–135).⁵ Again this echoes similar ideas in Evagrius and the wider Desert Tradition (Evagrius Ponticus 2006, 109; Athanasius of Alexandria 1950, chap. 5). It would seem to be such an idea that Rolle discusses in his short English epistle, *Ego Dormio* [I sleep], when in a poetic section he stresses, echoing the title of the work, how the true contemplative never has Christ out of mind, no matter what else she is doing:

5 Rolle stresses that women’s bodies initially posed a temptation, a motif that reinforces a connection to Desert Spirituality.

“I sleep and my heart awakes.” Great love he shows who is never too weary to love, but always, standing, sitting, going, or any other deed doing, is always on his love thinking, and again and again thereof dreaming. (Rolle 1988a, 26.3–6) [38]

Here we see contemplative action at work. No matter what else the mystic is doing, her mind is stably fixed on Jesus, from which nothing can distract her. [39]

Important too is Rolle’s claim that activity *per se* is not meritorious, what matters is that one’s will and thought are focused on loving God. He stresses that good deeds will arise from this focus; however, no one will be able to tell simply on the basis of actions whether they result from contemplative union. Nonetheless, those who do not perform good acts have not attained to the highest degree of love, since love is never idle. As he puts it in *The Form of Living*, [40]

Nothing that I do outwardly proves that I love God, for a wicked man might do as much penance in body, as much waking and fasting as I do. [...] love is truly in the will, not in work except as a sign of love. For he who says he loves God, and will not do what is in him to show love, tell him that he lies. Love will not be idle, it is always working some good. If it ceases working, understand that it cools and vanishes. (Rolle 1910, 59–61, 1988b, 20.685–704)⁶ [41]

While not exactly the same as suggesting that Margaret take leave of virtues, it is clear that he is discouraging her from simply doing good acts. He argues, along similar lines to Origen, that the only truly virtuous acts are those performed by those who sincerely love God, that is, whose desires are entirely given over to God. Indeed, elsewhere in his corpus, he stresses the opposition between love of God and love of things of the world in starker terms, writing of how the love of God totally absorbs the mind: “When the eternal love of God has absorbed our minds it immediately makes those things which our bodily vision sees as desirable silly” (Rolle 1968, 185, 6.254–256). This indicates that Rolle promoted a form of action predicated on contemplation in differentiation from ordinary action, one which hints at the possibility of a social mysticism. [42]

Contemplation, Virtues and Action

The issue of virtues and the relationship of action to contemplation is also taken up elsewhere in the English mystical tradition. It is discussed at length in the Middle English translation of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. *The Mirror* was originally composed in Picard (although this version is lost), in the late thirteenth century by Marguerite Porete, who was likely an itinerant beguine.⁷ In Paris in 1310, Marguerite and her work were consigned to the flames under a cloud of heretical charges. Contemporary scholars are divided over the validity of the claim that Marguerite was a heretic (Arblaster and Faesen 2012, 315–16) and, despite them, Marguerite’s work continued to circulate anonymously (Trombley 2017, 2018). The Middle English translation, *þe Myroure of Symples Soules*, is possibly the closest record to the original text that we now possess (Lerner 2010; however, see Cré 2006). The text is extremely complex, and its thought seemingly fragmented (Chance 2007, 132 commenting on the Middle [43]

6 I have modernised and amended Geraldine E. Hodgson’s translation. For an alternative reading of this passage, see Easterling (2015).

7 Of course, we do not know that Marguerite was a beguine. She does, however, share certain traits with other similar women, like Hadewijch, who appear to have connections to the beguine movement (see O’Sullivan 2006; however, see More 2018).

French), making an assessment of its overall theology difficult and certainly open to dispute. The anonymous Middle English translator, M.N., recognises this and inserts a number of annotations next to passages which they suggests “*haþ be mystake,*” (Porete 1968, 247.8), a phrase that can be translated as meaning either “problematic” or “obscure.”⁸

One point which arouses the glossator’s interest is a discussion of how a person in mystical union is described as taking leave of all good virtuous works, including involvement in ecclesial activities such as masses, sermons, fasts and prayers (Porete 1968, 254.27–28, 258.13–14). Pursuit of virtues is portrayed as opposed to complete surrender to God, such that the perfect soul is said no longer to be a servant of the virtues, or any desires aside from God:

But these souls that I speak of here put the virtues at bay. For they do nothing for them, but the virtues do all that the souls’ will, without danger or opposition, for these souls are her mistresses. Whoever asks these free souls, sure and peaceable, if they desire to be in purgatory, they say “no.” If they would live with the certitude of their salvation, they say “no.” If they would be in paradise, they say “no.” So, what do they want? They have nothing of will with which to will this, if they willed, they would descend from love. (Porete 1968, 257.31–258.5)

In glossing this passage, first M.N. agrees that a soul in perfect union with God has no will, work, or desire and cannot think of anything other than God. Second, however, M.N. makes clear that such a soul does not cease to perform outward works, it is simply that when she conducts them she no longer strives to do so (see Nelstrop 2020).⁹ Instead, it is as though the one in perfect union with God were conducting herself by rote, as if no longer present to herself. She has become so focused on the divine and has so given herself and her will over to God that God alone works in her, willing his will. Thus, M.N. asserts that although the perfected soul does indeed carry out good works, she is no longer invested in them and so works effortlessly. As M.N. puts it:

When Love works in the soul and holds in her the sparkles of his bright beams, she then truly understands [...] that the work of love is of more worth [...] than doing her own work. Therefore she takes this for the most worthy [activity] and principally sets about this, so that all her attention and all her business that was before in outward works is now set on this. But yet she also does the other, as by the disposition of good custom (as *bi vsage* of good custom) [...] But she does it without desire and without the manner of investment/habit (usage) that she had previously, [i.e.,] in laboring in terms of opposing wills. Instead she fully attends in all that she may to the dispositions (usages) of love, which are all divine and upwards. So that whatever this creature does, it is so united to love [i.e., God], that it is love that does it, and so it is that she suffers love to work in her. [...] Therefore from her own perspective she does nothing, but God does his work in them [such souls]. And these souls have no real will or desire, they have totally

8 All translations are my own.

9 The argument made in Nelstrop (2020) connects M.N.’s annotations to a Thomist understanding of deification. While this argument is relevant to the particular understanding of action that is being discussed here, in that Nelstrop comments on the term ‘usage’ in the Middle English, particularly in relation to the idea of sinning seven times a day, it is beyond the scope of the current essay to delve into this in more detail. See Nelstrop’s particular discussion of ‘vsage’ and habitus.

transplanted it into God, so that they may neither will nor desire anything, but God wills in them and makes them do his will. (Porete 1968, 258.28–259.17)

The passage, of course, raises questions about individual agency in any actions carried out. McGinn labels *The Mirror* as an example of “radical, or hard, annihilation, that is, the conviction that the created self, especially the created will, needs to be brought to naught for God to take over the place where the soul once existed” (n.d., page number?). However, John Arblaster, commenting on the Middle French, has recently argued that since the text continues to use the female pronoun for the soul, the implication is that she remains in some sense agentic, even though her will is entirely given over to God (Arblaster 2021). [48]

The Mirror (both the Middle French and Middle English) likewise stresses a difference between evil inclinations and wilful engagement in sin, but in ways that suggest a greater detachment between body and soul than in Rolle’s account. The text appears to suggest to its readers that sinning in body should not necessarily be equated with any kind of corruption demonstrating that the soul requires correction. Quite the opposite, as Danielle C. Dubois notes commenting on the Middle French, Marguerite’s “discussion suggests that the virtuous fall leads to God and is therefore positive” (Dubois 2015, 434). An idea echoed in the Middle English translation. As the Middle English text puts it: [49]

“Oh,” says this soul [...] “now I have some of that which Holy Scripture says, ‘that the righteous fall seven times a day’. He is truly enlightened who understands that this is not a case for correction, for correction is required when men fall into fault through consent of their will, and corruption is the fleshliness in the constitution of our bodies. [...] For by the disposition of Adam’s sin, the body is frail and disposed to faults, so it often tends to despise a thing less than the goodness of God. And this Holy Scripture calls ‘falling’, because it is so. But the righteous keeps himself from consenting to the failing, even though the disposition might grow, so that this failing into which the righteous falls by disposition as before said, is more a virtue to him than a vice because of the will that dwells free by refusing the failing [...]” (Porete 1968, 329.1–5, 330.6–11) [50]

Dubois suggests that the key to this idea is that Marguerite (like the German mystical theologian Meister Eckhart) does not think of natural dispositions in the same way that Aristotle thought of bad habits (2015, 438). They are rather distractions, and it is only in consenting to these evil inclinations that one sins; sin is, on this account, an act of the will (2015, 429–40). This idea also underpins ascetic engagement with *logismoi* or bad thoughts in the Desert Tradition, as noted above. Nonetheless, *The Mirror* argues that even though he does not sin, the just man still falls seven times a day. Dubois suggests that Marguerite’s goal is to argue that falling can be both an occasion for refocusing on God and is illustrative of the corrupt nature of the body in this life, which is an inevitability of birth. As Dubois puts it: [51]

The first is that from the perspective of the individual’s moral development, the fall promotes improvement; it is beneficial because it provides occasion for the exercise of virtue and for reorienting oneself to God. Second, the readers are made to understand that because the just man lives in an imperfect body and world, even he is fallible. (Dubois 2015, 440) [52]

This sense of human imperfection is one that Rolle also picks up on in his discussions of [53]

Christ as the perfect contemplative. However, Dubois suggests that Marguerite (along with Eckhart) presents us with a far less pessimistic view of human nature than was common in this period (Dubois 2015, 442), although it is worth noting that a person is only said to be capable of acting in this way when their will is totally absorbed in and subsumed by God. We see this at play in Marguerite's discussion of Mary and Martha (Porete 1968, 124, 1999, 156; see Dubois 2015, 448). *The Myrour's* discussion of the just man draws occasional comment from M.N., yet no gloss is attached to the passage quoted above (see Nelstrop 2019). This stands as further testimony to the way that the Middle English mystical tradition promotes the idea that those who enter into perfect union with God engage in action, or doing, differently to those who love God less than perfectly.

The Mixed Life and Contemplation in Action

Contemplation in action is also operational within the English mystical tradition at a more popular level, appearing within the Latin text of the anonymous Franciscan devotional manual, *The Meditationes Vitae Christi* (Meditations of the Life of Christ). This hugely popular work, which circulated across England and the Continent, likewise differentiates between ordinary actions and those that flow out of contemplation. The texts stress that in order to be effective, that is, transformative, the words of preachers must flow out of contemplation; preaching is not a work of ordinary action. Nicholas Love's Middle English translation, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, significantly abridges this section of the *Meditationes*, referring readers to the English mystic Walter Hilton for a more detailed discussion of the *medeled liyf* (mixed life), that is "sometimes active and sometimes contemplative and belongs to diverse people who in their worldly occupations have the grace of spiritual love" (Love 2018, 122.35–38; see Hilton 1986). While neither Love nor the *Meditationes* are interested in how the mixed life can also be exemplified in secular living, it would seem erroneous to suggest that Love was little interested in the mixed life. On closer examination, we find that although Love shows little concern for secular modes of mixed living—the subject with which Hilton deals in his short treatise *Medeled Liyf* (Epistle on the Mixed Life)—Love is interested in the mixed life or actions of preachers, that is, those who engage in contemplative action. Thus, even whilst replacing all the quotations from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) with a few references taken from Gregory the Great's (d. 604) *Moralia in Job* (Morals in the Book of Job) (Love 2018, 120), Love keeps the tenor of the original, which he follows in using the traditional motif of Martha and Mary to exemplify the active and the contemplative lives respectively. He does so to stress that in choosing contemplation, Mary opts for the better life (2018, 121.32–122.27), and that whilst Jesus engaged in preaching—a form of mixed living—he did so on the basis of his contemplative union with God. It is this, Love argues, that makes the ideal preacher. Love carefully describes how such a one progresses in the spiritual life from virtuous living to contemplation and finally to a third life in which one works in the world but for the benefit of others:

It is first necessary that in the first part of the active life man's soul is purged of vices and strengthen and confirmed in virtues. After that it is informed, taught and enlightened in the contemplative life, and *then in the third degree he may with assurance govern and work for the benefit of others*, as it is said. (Love 2018, 119.11–14, my emphasis)

Although Love does not stress the idea of social mysticism in this regard, he nonetheless

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differentiates the action of the preacher from secular forms of the mixed life. The latter describes the lifestyle of those who partake both in ordinary public actions and contemplative prayer where these are separate things, whereas in the former they are joined since actions arise out of contemplation.

The Meditationes Vitae Christi is known to have exerted an influence, albeit perhaps in translation, on both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. The latter probably knew Love's *Myrroure* (Staley 1994, 127–71), although Michelle Karnes suggests that her spirituality resonates more closely with similar ideas found in the anonymous Middle English work *The Prickying of Love* (The Pricking of Love), a translation of James of Milan's *Stimulus Amoris* (Karnes 2007, 407n111). Margery Kempe's *Boke* (Book) is far from a theological exposition of mysticism, being more akin to a hagiography. In it, Margery—with the aid of several scribes—recounts her contemplative journey throughout her life. Yet even though it does not contain any detailed discussion of the nature of contemplative action, Margery nonetheless recounts how she is often so taken over with the love of God that she operates in the world as though unaware of it. She reports being unable to control fits of crying at the mention of Jesus' name or even at the sight of babies, who remind her of the infant Christ. So overcome is she with the love of God that, when on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she rides on a donkey in imitation of Christ and collapses on Mount Calvary cruciform: [57]

And when they came up on the Mount of Calvary, she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, but writhed and wrestled in her body, spreading her arms out wide, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart, for in the city of her soul she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified. (Kempe 2004, 104, 1.28; Staley 1996, 1.1.7, 1571–5) [58]

Margery's public displays of emotion appear to have been welcomed by the Franciscans, who perhaps viewed her as in some sense exemplifying the emotional engagement with Christ's life that the *Meditationes* recommends (Wallace 2021). In this relation, she breaks with social norms, her mysticism spilling out into her daily life and actions. For example, she is removed from church for crying uncontrollably during a sermon and, more seriously, is accused of heresy on the grounds that she shares her message in the manner of a preacher, an accusation she denies. It is also clear that her body is held up as a sign beyond words of the workings of God within her, such that her *Book* records how people stand on stools to see the spiritual out-working of God within her. [59]

Imagination, Detachment and Contemplative Action

The blurring of imaginative meditation and contemplation that we find in Margery's *Book* quite possibly echoes a thirteenth-century Bonaventuran and wider Franciscan elevation of imagination in which it becomes conflated with contemplation or mysticism (Karnes 2011). Nonetheless, the kind of imaginative practice that Margery details here—seeing anew in her mind's eye Christ's crucifixion—was often held to be a lower practice than mysticism, and so connected to ordinary action rather than mystical action or social mysticism. We find this differentiation in both the thought of Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, some of whose writings circulated in England in translation, and who was well known to the Carthusians, and the anonymous Middle English *Cloud*-Author (late fourteenth century). [60]

Ruusbroec suggests that behaviour similar to Margery's is indicative of an early stage of [61]

contemplation but not the level of union out of which non-attached or contemplative actions flow. We might think of this person as beginner rather than an adept or someone who has attained full mystical union. Ruusbroec thus writes in his *Boecksken der verclaringhe* (Little Book of Enlightenment) of such beginnings:

See, this eternal love which lives in the spirit and to which it is united without intermediary gives its light and its grace in all the powers of the soul, and this is the source of all virtue. [...] For you must know that the grace of God flows down to the lower powers, and touches the heart of man, and from that comes heartfelt affection and sensitive desire for God. And the affection and desire penetrate the heart and the senses, flesh and blood, and all the corporeal nature and cause in him strain and restlessness in his body so that often he does not know what to do with himself. He is in the state of a man who is so drunk that he is no longer in possession of himself. And from this comes much eccentric behaviour, which these soft-hearted men cannot well control, that is they often lift their heads to heaven with eyes wide-open because of restless desire; sometimes joy, sometimes weeping, now singing now shouting, now weal and now woe, and often both together at once, leaping, running, clapping their hands together, kneeling, bowing down and making similar fuss in many ways. As long as man remains in this state and stands with open heart raised up to the richness of God who lives in his spirit, he experiences new touching from God and new impatience in love. (Ruusbroec 2014, 631–32)

[62]

As Ruusbroec stresses in this passage, God is at work in the lives of beginners. God's grace flows down to the lower powers (amongst which is imagination) and their imaginative engagement with God causes the recipients to leap, clap, bow, weep and sing, amongst other forms of eccentric behaviour. At the same time, Ruusbroec holds this to be only the penultimate stage of union. Beyond it lies the more controlled final point of 'unity.' Although he doesn't deny that God is at work in the initial stages, Ruusbroec is concerned with how "soft-hearted men" demonstrate a lack of control in their actions at this stage. While we might say that their actions do, in a sense, flow out of contemplation or mysticism, Ruusbroec claims these are not truly contemplative actions or social mysticism, since they manifest as a kind of frenetic activity that is far from detached. Marleen Cré notes that the differentiation between union and unity forged by Ruusbroec in this respect is not retained in those of his works that were translated into Middle English, such as his *Vanden blinckenden steen* (The Sparkling Stone) (Cré 2004). It is possible that if Margery did know of Ruusbroec's thought, she might not have known of this distinction. Other indigenous writers within the English tradition also stress that the kind of activity that we find Margery engaging in is not contemplative action in its full and proper sense, or even at all.

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Walter Hilton defends the kind of imaginative practice that we see exemplified in Margery's life as a form of contemplation, even though he holds that it is not the culmination of the contemplative or mystical life. Rather, he characterises it as a form for 'simple souls' who are not able to engage with elevated and abstract practice (1991, 80–82). *The Cloud*-Author is more scathing of the kind of eccentric behaviour that we also see described by Ruusbroec and exemplified by Margery since he does not believe that it flows out of mysticism at all. As John Burrow stresses, *The Cloud*-Author is deeply concerned that ordinary action and contemplation should not be confused with one another (Burrow 1977). While *The Cloud*-Author does allow

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that, for some individuals, spiritual sensation will flow out of contemplation, in his writing he is more often preoccupied with those who he thinks are trying to experience ordinary action as contemplative. He writes of those who try to force a kind of contemplative action into their bodies by speaking in piping voices and cocking their heads to the side in a manner of silly sheep:

The expressions and gestures which this counterfeit contemplation (or anything similar) produces in those that are led astray are wonderful to behold, much more so than those of God's true disciples, for these latter are always most proper in their behaviour, physical or spiritual. But not so with these others! Whoever would or might look at them as they sit at such a time, will see them staring (if their eyes are open) as though they were mad, and sniggering as if they saw the devil. (It is good for them to beware, for the fiend truly is not far away!) Some squint as though they were silly sheep that have been banged on the head, and were going soon to die. Some hang their heads on one side as if a worm were in their ears. Some squeak when they should speak, as if they had no spirit in their bodies—the proper condition for a hypocrite. Some cry and whine in their throat, because they are greedy and hasty to say what they think. [...] Much disorderly and unseemly behaviour arises out this error, as one would perceive if he saw everything. (Wolters 1961, 123–24; Gallagher 1997, 51.1812–14)¹⁰

[65]

The Cloud-Author argues that rather than leading to contemplation, this kind of behaviour is far more likely to cause one to fall victim to attacks of the devil (Wolters 1961, 122–23). He warns his reader not to strive and “too hastily snatch [at contemplation] like a greedy greyhound” (Gallagher 1997, 46.1632).¹¹ He stresses that one cannot rush to contemplative action. It requires great patience and long practice. Like Rolle, he offers his readers techniques to calm the mind, such as focusing on a single word—sin or God—in a mantra-like manner. When they engage in such practices, *The Cloud*-Author warns his readers not to envision examples of sin or God (a point that Rolle does not stress). *The Cloud*-Author tells his readers to hold only the general meaning of the term in mind. This technique is intended to still their naturally over-active imaginations rather than fuel them, which, he argues, is the true purpose of prayer. As he puts it,

[66]

We must therefore pray in the height, depth, length, and breadth of our spirits. And not in many words, but using a little word of one syllable. [...] In itself prayer is, in fact, nothing else than a devout intention directed to God in order to get goodness, and remove evil. [...] when we earnestly pray for the removal evil, let us therefore neither say, think, nor mean any more than this little word “sin.” And if we pray earnestly to acquire goodness, let us cry out, in word or thought or desire, no other word than “God” [...] you should in the same manner fill your spirit with the spiritual meaning of this word “sin,” without any special looking at any kind of sin, whether it is venial or mortal: pride, anger, envy, avarice, sloth, gluttony, or lust. [...] Feel sin in its totality—as a lump—not knowing what it is except that it is no other thing than yourself. And then ceaselessly cry in your spirit this one thing: “Sin! Sin! Sin! Out! Out! Out!” [...] You should do the same with this little

[67]

10 I have slightly amended Wolters' translation.

11 This is my own translation. I have not used Wolters (1961, 115)

word “God.” Fill your spirit with its spiritual meaning, without looking at any one of His works, whether they are good, better, or best of all, bodily or spiritual [...].¹² (Wolters 1961, 106–8; Gallagher 1997, 39–40.1415 – 1463)

Robert Llewelyn has suggested that in this respect the approach to prayer that we find in *The Cloud of Unknowing* parallels Zen Buddhist meditation on letting-be when faced with distracting thoughts (Llewelyn 1981, 72). In this respect it differs from Evagrius’ approach to calming the mind, since he encourages monks to evaluate the different temptations so as to know how better to counter them. At the same times, Maika J. Will stresses that *The Cloud*-Author is no quietist. Contemplative prayer involved effort on the disciple’s part; the active part of oneself is always being distracted from contemplation, such that one needs to constantly place all one’s thinking “under” what *The Cloud*-Author terms “a cloud of forgetting” (Will 1993). It is in this vein that *The Cloud*-Author also speaks of those who have achieved contemplative stillness being able to act in the world without it being a distraction. They are so at home with God that even when they are sitting, walking, standing, or kneeling, they are not distracted (we noted earlier that Rolle claims something rather similar in *Ego Dormio*). As discussed above, unlike those overcome with actions that they cannot control, for *The Cloud*-Author, true contemplatives are fully in control of themselves and when they act, they do so effortlessly. Thus, while this is not entirely active inaction, it comes close, as the parallels that *The Cloud*-Author draws between such contemplatives and Aaron indicate: [68]

And there are some who by grace are so spiritually skilful, and so familiar (homely) with God in this grace of contemplation that they may have it [full undistracted complete awareness] when they want it in the normal state of the human soul, as when they are sitting, walking, standing, kneeling. Yet on such occasions they are in full control of their deliberations, both physical and spiritual, and can use them if they wish, admittedly not without some hindrance, yet without great hindrance. We have an example [...] in Aaron, the priest of the Temple. (Wolters 1961, 146; Gallagher 1997, 71.2381–2394) [69]

As *The Cloud*-Author elsewhere clarifies, he holds Aaron rather than Moses to be the contemplative *par excellence*. [70]

Deification, Agency and Mystical Action

The Monk of Farne likewise writes of being so taken over by the love of God as to lose consciousness of actions. Here he has in mind a similar notion to Rolle and *The Cloud*-Author: an idea of detached action. The Monk of Farne was a solitary monk, who lived on Farne Island off the coast of Northumberland in the fourteenth century and wrote a series of seven *Meditaciones* (Meditations) (Whitehead 2013, 125). He composed a number of mystical works, including a *Meditacio ad crucifixum* (Meditation to Christ Crucified). In this, he describes how it is possible that the “heart is so possessed by divine love that there is no place within him [the devotee] where God is not loved” (Monk of Farne 1994, 70.90). This, he argues, allows a person to act so completely in accord with the will of God that they will not undertake sinful acts. Like Rolle, he claims that in such a state, spiritual sensations take over the person’s sensorium such that they act without awareness of their actions. While he stresses that this [71]

12 I have slightly amended Wolters’ translation.

is a form of deification (1994, 187, 47.71), unlike the writers discussed above, the Monk of Farne does not believe that this state is humanly possible, in the sense that one cannot attain it and continue to live and therefore act out of it (see Nelstrop 2018, on deification in Rolle and Julian, see 2020). This is presumably because he does not believe that divinity can fully reside within any other human form than that of Jesus prior to the next life. As he puts it, we find such a devotee,

so much absorbed by the love of God and inebriated with it that he forgets himself, and does not know what he does apart from loving. He does not notice what he sees, nor understand what he hears; he does not realize what he is tasting, nor distinguish smell; he is unaware of what he is touching, because the surpassing delight of divine love within his heart makes him forget to use his five senses and reason [...]. Love of this sort so dilates the heart that he cannot bear it any longer, and dies as the result. (Monk of Farne 1994, 207, 82.98) [72]

While in a sense we might say that the Monk of Farne advocates social mysticism and views it as highly Christological, he is clearly sceptical of its possibility in this life for anyone other than Christ. One might suspect that he would doubt the extent to which Margery's actions were truly contemplative acts. [73]

Turning to a final Middle English mystic, Julian of Norwich, while she does not discuss actions that flow from contemplation—except in stressing that her visions are not intended for herself alone but also for her fellow Christians—she is concerned with the issue of agency within mystical willing. In a manner resonant of the twelfth-century Cistercian William of St Thierry (1085–1148), whose radical accounts of union and deification influenced Marguerite Porete (Arblaster 2015), Julian speaks of an indistinguishable union of love between God and soul. As she puts it, [74]

There is no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that will be saved. (Julian of Norwich 2015, 120, 5–6, my emphasis) [75]

She also writes on three occasions of the possibility of rediscovering what she calls a godly will within the soul, which she states can never be subject to sin: [76]

In this revelation I saw and understood most certainly that *in every soul that will be saved is a godly will which never assented to sin*, nor never shall, which is so good that it can never intend evil, but always intends what is good constantly and does good in the sight of God. (Julian of Norwich 2015, 118, 18–22, my emphasis) [77]

As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton notes, this idea resonates with Marguerite's thinking on the virtuous fall (Kerby-Fulton 2006, 272–323). However, unlike Eckhart and possibly also Marguerite, Julian does not believe that there is a part of the soul that is uncreated. Indeed, she holds that creation is what distinguishes the soul from God, even though the soul is formed of a non-material substance. On one level, Julian argues that this means that we can be taken up to share in the life of the Trinity. However, Julian still speaks of a distinction in which the soul is not God but is in God. As she puts it, [78]

And our substance is in our Father, God almighty, and our substance is in our mother [the Son], God all wisdom, and our substance is in our Lord, the Holy Spirit, God all goodness, for our substance is whole in each person of the Trinity, which is one God. (Julian of Norwich 2015, 3–6) [79]

Cary Howie stresses that this little word ‘in’ sets the soul apart from God in Julian’s thought. Using this spatial metaphor, Julian draws attention to a difference between God and soul. What is more, for the soul to be in God and God in the soul are not the same. While God can be in all things, this is not true of the soul, leading Howie to comment that, “‘In’ names not a quality of the soul—as though the soul could be thought apart from its being in God—but is that mark of its ontological distinctness from its divine source” (2007, 132). As such, even though, as Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross note, Julian closely identifies herself with Christ, there is nonetheless scope for difference and so human agency (Gillespie and Ross 1992; Nelstrop 2020). [80]

Many more examples of this dynamic of contemplative action can be found within the English mystical tradition, and much more could be said about its relation to annihilation and deification if space permitted (on annihilation and medieval mysticism, see Newman 2016; Arblaster 2018; on deification in English mysticism, see Nelstrop 2020). However, with the possible exception of Margery, whose behaviour disrupts social norms, none of the writers discussed engages in actions that have political or social repercussions, and certainly none theorise such a dynamic between action and contemplation. It is not however absent from the Christian tradition. In a contemporary setting, it is ably illustrated in the writings of Howard Thurman, Thomas Merton, and Evelyn Underhill. All had immersed themselves in the thought of medieval Christian mystics. Underhill’s own thinking on mysticism owes a great debt to Ruusbroec. She also had a great interest in the English mystical tradition. Indeed it was her scholarly work that was in large part responsible for creating renewed popular interest in the English mystics, laying the foundations for them to be household names today. Underhill, James and Merton have also been seminal in shaping the modern study of mysticism. Yet their thinking on the relationship between mysticism and action has been overlooked. It is to the thought of these four writers that we will now briefly turn by way of coda. [81]

Social and Political Action in Twentieth-Century Anglophone Mysticism

Given the emphasis on ineffability and individual experience in many contemporary definitions of mysticism, one might be forgiven for thinking that the dynamic discussed above would be largely absent in the scholarly literature that saw the study of mysticism re-enter the academy in the early twentieth century. Evelyn Underhill has been criticised for advocating a privatising account of mystical experience. Yet she clearly stresses the idea of social mysticism in the Middle Ages, even if not doing so with reference to the English mystical tradition. In her magnum opus *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, first published in 1911, Underhill speaks of action as the pinnacle of the mystical journey, the outworking of what she terms the highest contemplative state, “the unitive life” (1911). True mysticism, she writes, is characterised by the heroism of a transformed existence that is “lived [...] in the world” (1911, 495). The mystics who for her best exemplify this are Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), and George Fox (1624–1691), all of whom were involved in ecclesial reform. To this list she also adds Joan of Arc (d. 1431), writing of a lady who courageously led out the French armies against the English: [82]

We see Joan of Arc, a child of the peasant class, leaving the sheepfold to lead the [83]

armies of France. [...] vitality flowed in on her, she knew not how or why. She was united with the Infinite Life, and became Its agent, the medium of Its strength [...]. (Underhill 1911, 514)

Although undoubtedly an overly romantic picture, Underhill argues that all Christian mysticism, at least as she reads it, is marked by its engagement with a transcendent and creative force. She describes this force as “[...] fertile, creative, as well as merely active. [...] It is the agent of a fresh outbirth of spiritual vitality into the world; the helpmate of the Transcendent Order, the mother of a spiritual progeny” (1911, 516). Underhill, like Richard of St Victor, with whose writing she was familiar, uses a birthing metaphor to capture how mystical action flows from unitive encounter as its culmination. Underhill’s thinking draws on Henri Bergson’s notion of *élan vital*—a life force that flows through all things. Although Bergson later tried to distance himself from Vitalism (Burwick and Douglas 1992) and Underhill came to view it as somewhat discredited (1930, viii), she never abandoned her belief that an energetic vitality lies at the heart of all that is, and so at the centre of mysticism. However, for Underhill this can in no way be reduced to mere social action. The mystic, she writes, although “in the world, is never of it” (1911, 496). The power of their actions is not to be confused with human striving, but rather their actions reveal the work of an internal force. This idea resonates closely with the paradoxical dynamic that underpins Thomas’ assessment of Traherne, as was discussed earlier.¹³

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Mysticism gained a new respectability in various Anglophone contexts over the course of the nineteenth century. Underhill was far from alone in promoting it in England. Another important advocate was Dean William Ralph Inge (1860–1954). He published on mysticism (for example, Inge 1947), and engaged in public debate with Underhill. In the U.S., a key author was the psychologist and philosopher William James. Grace Jantzen views James as chief amongst twentieth-century exponents of mysticism who largely divorced mysticism from social ethics. It is true that James sought to dislodge it from its religious underpinnings. To quote Leigh Eric Schmidt, James and others in the US came to view it as “loosely spiritual, intuitive, emancipatory, and universal” (2012, 502). However, it is as such that the US women’s rights advocate Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) saw it as a potential resource for tackling issues of social injustice, particularly the fight for female emancipation. In this vein, it also came to be viewed as the basis for a new non-sectarian religion post the American Civil War (1861–1865). Indeed James promotes mysticism as a universalising platform, free of all religious dogma or faith affiliation, and so a hope of union beyond differences (Schmidt 2012). Schmidt points out that James envisages mysticism as a transformative encounter for social good: “James imagined mystical experience as a way to unleash energy, to find the hot place of human initiative and endeavor, and to encourage the heroic, the strenuous, and the vital” (2012, 517). In relation to this, Schmidt notes that James’ famous essays on mysticism, which form a crucial part of his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, are positioned adjacent to one on saintliness. Admittedly this dimension is somewhat hidden by the emphasis that James places on “solitary subjectivity” (Schmidt 2012, 513). However, those who followed in his footsteps and built on his work, such as the Quaker Rufus Jones, clearly emphasise that personal mystical spirituality finds its true outworking in social justice. Jones was an important influence on the academic and preacher Howard Thurman, whose mystically-driven theology even influenced Martin Luther King Jr and Jessie Jackson. It is in Thurman’s thought that we see particularly

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13 Underhill does refer to *The Cloud-Author* as a friend of ‘activists,’ but in so doing, she is stressing that his thought is not quietist, and she does not have this dynamic in mind (1922, 18).

clearly how mysticism leads to forms of action that transcend ordinary action, such that his approach is aptly described as social mysticism.

While some of the early academic protagonists of mysticism saw mysticism as a means of transcending culture and differences, Howard Thurman, whose grandmother had been a slave in Florida, argues that no African American has the luxury of such a perspective. As he puts it in *The Luminous Darkness*, [86]

My roots are deep in the throbbing reality of the Negro idiom and from it I draw a full measure of inspiration and vitality [...] there is no waking moment or sleep interval when one may expect respite from the desolation and despair of segregation. (Thurman 1999, x) [87]

For Thurman, mystical insight must always work to remove the obstacles that prevent others from realising the unity of all things. Consequently, he stresses that it must address social injustice. Born in Florida in 1899, Thurman was educated within a racially-segregated system. A bright and studious young man, he progressed to become a university professor and a prominent preacher. He used these platforms to advocate social justice, particularly through his writing, for example, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. It was under the tutelage of Jones that Thurman first encountered Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart, who had a profound impact on this thought. [88]

Although Thurman discusses both mysticism and social action across his writings, the connection between them is most overtly addressed in his 1978 Lawrence Lecture, written three years before his death. Here he stresses that one cannot separate the inner and outer aspects of one's life, which he suggests "represent a single pulsebeat [...] one ebb and flow" (2014, 351). There is, however, always a tension between them for the mystic. "How" he asks "to keep my [...] inner altar, uncluttered, and at the same time not use that as an escape from involvement in the traffic of life" (2014, 357). His answer is to model oneself on Jesus who, he states, exemplifies the true outworking of this tension, since in Jesus there is no dichotomy. His inner life drives his outer actions. Without this contemplative base, Thurman stresses that many actions will be of no value. He determines that "unless a person is centred, all kinds of actions are perfectly futile" (2014, 409), although in suggesting this he stresses that he in no sense wishes to diminish social action *per se*. His point is that mystical-inspired action is not mere social action. It is not action for action's sake. It is action that seeks first and foremost to make others fully awake to their God-given possibilities. As Thurman writes, [89]

the mystic's concern with the imperative of social action is not merely to improve the condition of society. It is not merely to feed the hungry, not merely to relieve human suffering and human misery. If this were all, in and of itself, it would be important surely. But this is not all. The basic consideration has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action. (Thurman 2014, 244) [90]

In his early and most famous work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he frames Jesus as one driven by such motivation. Stressing that Jesus was a Jew living under Roman occupation, and so one who understood the life and psychological impact of being a hated minority, he points out that Jesus neither capitulated to the Romans nor resisted them with violent force. Instead Jesus' response was to demand radically honesty, whilst rejecting hate. Why did Jesus react [91]

like this, Thurman asks, when hatred is a natural response to oppression, and is not without its own energy and capacity to craft an identity? Jesus, he writes, saw how hate destroys the human spirit. Therefore, He offered a ‘third way’ (McCaulley 2019, 204), one which prevents the oppressor from stripping the oppressed of their basic human dignity:

Jesus rejected hatred. It wasn’t because Jesus lacked the vitality and strength. It was not because he lacked the incentive. Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with the father. (Thurman 1949, 88) [92]

As such, Thurman sees Jesus working contrary to the normative negative answers that the disinherited person tends towards when posed with “the most important questions on which mental health depends: Who am I? What am I?” (1949, 49). For Thurman, a positive answer to these questions lies deep in a vision of the mystical unity that underpins all things, offering a sense of one’s worth that nothing can undermine. It is this vision that Thurman sees Jesus offering through his actions and which the mystic seeks to emulate through hers. [93]

Yet this leads the mystic into a peculiar dilemma. She cannot merely side with the oppressed. She also has a duty to work for change on behalf of the oppressor since both are cut off from God by the social injustices in which they are entrapped. As Thurman puts it in his Laurence lecture, [94]

When social action is viewed from this perspective, a very crucial problem arises. The problem that the victims of injustice, for instance, face is not unlike that which faces the perpetrators of the deeds that offend. The assumption here is that both parties—the sufferer and the offender—are cut off from their own altars. I am under obligation to identify with each. It is much easier within the context of mystical piety to identify with the sufferer, the hungry, the poor, the neglected, than with those whose power, privilege and insensitivity are largely responsible for the social ills. But I must not forget that the ill that a man does to others stands between that man and that man’s own altar. Of course, of this he may not be aware. One of the radical functions of social action is to make the offender aware of this. (Thurman 2014, 253) [95]

For Thurman, this means a lifetime of working through peaceful means and using shock-tactics, like boycotts, to help people realise how they are cutting off themselves and others from the mystical unity that underpins the universe (2014, 259, 261). If these peaceful tactics do not work, Thurman suggests that one may have to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. Yet Thurman stresses, this must not be done hastily, nor does anyone know how one will react if called to do so. He recounts an incident that occurred while visiting a black university campus to speak to students. At the instigation of his host, he found himself sitting at his host’s window, a rifle thrust in his hands, keeping watch against a potentially lethal racist attack (2014, 292). He took comfort in the realisation that if it came to it, he had two choices: to fight, or to walk out and lay himself down before mob. The moment didn’t come, yet Thurman enjoins us that the mystic is never free of such decisions. He is not so lost in God that he no longer lives as a self in a real world where discernment concerning when to act or not is unnecessary, since “the world of things and men does not conform to the unity which he has experienced in his vision” (1998, 114). [96]

As Anthony Sean Neal remarks, Thurman believed that such unity was most readily accessed [97]

and realised in faith community, leading Thurman to set up the first inter-racial, interfaith church in America. It was such harmony, Thurman believes, that provides a platform out of which life can grow toward the ultimate unity at its source. Yet Thurman was aware that for some this course of action was a disappointment. They had looked to him to be their new ‘Moses’ in the Civil rights movement—a mantle that would be taken up by Martin Luther King Jr—yet what, they asked, did Thurman do? “He turned mystic on us!” (2014, 372). This reaction highlights the tension between mysticism and action. In consequence, William Apol prefers to view Thurman as a prophet rather than a social activist proper (2003). Yet Thurman stresses “social action is never for such a person [the mystic] an end in itself” (2014, 274). It is always a response to the urgency which he senses “to act and react responsibly out of [his] own centre” (1961, 5). As Thurman put it: “Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and do it. For what the world needs are people who are truly alive” (Dorrien 2018, 91).

A similar tension underpins the relationship between mysticism and action in the life and writings of Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Merton was born to artistic parents in France but was orphaned at an early age. He led a rather abandoned youth, which saw him removed from the University of Cambridge. He transferred to Columbia University and eventually converted to Catholicism. After working for several years as a university professor and writer and being rejected by the Franciscans, in 1942 he joined the Cistercian Trappist Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. The Trappists are a strictly enclosed order and Merton describes his calling to be both a writer and a Trappist as being “like a duck in a chicken coop.” While Merton longed to retreat from the world, his skill as a writer resulted in his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, becoming an instant, runaway bestseller. It was followed by works on contemplation, such as *What Is Contemplation?* (1948) and *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949). Merton slowly came to the realisation that individual solitude was not the place to which Christian mysticism led. His sense of this culminated around March 1958, after standing at the intersection of ‘fourth street’ and ‘walnut street.’ Although his journal records the events in more mundane terms (Harmless 2007, 32), as Merton the writer reflected on this event in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he came to see it as a moment in which he was “suddenly overwhelmed” as though “waking from a dream of separateness” to the realisation that a deep connection exists with all that is. He felt great love for all those he saw around him and saw “the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes” (1966, 156). He was struck by a vision of unity in which everything pointed him to God, and through which he came to understand the dignity of all people as made in the image of God:

It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely [...] the gate of heaven is everywhere. (Merton 1966, 156)

This burgeoning awareness was, William Harmless suggests, “a seeing that makes ordinary seeing seem dreamlike,” causing Merton to long for a world where there was no more war, no more injustice (Harmless 2007, 32). Writings on social justice, racial equality, the need for monastic reform, ecumenism, and nuclear disarmament followed.

Yet as with Thurman, this was not social action divorced from contemplation. Rather mys-

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ticism fuelled Merton with a desire to be a source of unity in himself. As he writes, again in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,

If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christianity, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians [...]. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ. (Merton 1966, 21) [102]

Although Merton died young in a tragic accident and left us no lecture like Thurman's, drawing together the threads of mysticism and social action, he similarly holds that action must grow out of contemplative roots. As he puts it in his essay, "Contemplation in a World of Action," [103]

What is the relation of this to action? Simply this. He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom and integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centeredness, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. (Merton 1998, 160) [104]

For Merton, as for Thurman, what I have been calling social mysticism demands the letting go of self; a kenotic, Christ-like submission, leading to action in the world. This action is not framed as necessarily the action that the world, or in Merton's case the Cistercian establishment, thinks it needs. Merton was banned for many years from publishing on nuclear disarmament. While these examples differ markedly from those discussed earlier in relation to the medieval mystical tradition and are underpinned by very different notions of theological anthropology, they nonetheless speak to a dynamic within the Christian mystical tradition which both Thurman and Merton knew well: a dynamic that does not distinguish contemplation entirely from action, even if it is in some sense world-rejecting. [105]

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to show that Christian mysticism and action are not antithetical. In the Christian tradition, from the medieval period into the modern, we find the promotion of a form of contemplative action that bears resemblance to the concept of *wuwei* or 'non-doing' in the Daoist writings of Laozi. In the medieval period we find hints at the possibility of mysticism leading to forms of social engagement. We see it at work in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, and in the understanding of preaching promoted in Love's *Mirror*. It is also apparent in the thought of Richard Rolle, who stresses that true love can never be idle—by which he means unitive love must have a virtuous outworking. The relationship between action and contemplation within Anglophone mysticism, however, only fully comes to the fore in the modern period, where for theorists of mysticism like Underhill, mysticism is the driving force for action, which, following medieval mystics like Ruusbroec, she argues is grounded in love. The idea of contemplative action is even more pronounced in the thought of the modern mystics Howard Thurman and Thomas Merton. Yet while contemplative action for Thurman [106]

and Merton is clearly linked to social justice, such that we are justified in referring to their mysticism as social mysticism, the actions that they associate with mysticism should not be reduced to mere social action. For both, actions that arise out of contemplative union, occurring within an annihilated self, do not represent the will of the mystic but that of a higher power. This resulted in Thurman stressing that he must work to liberate both the oppressed and oppressor; a view that led to criticism of the focus of his activities, which were centred on setting up an inter-racial interfaith church rather than leadership within the Civil Rights Movement, although as noted Thurman's thought acted as a source of inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr. The idea that virtuous actions arise out of the annihilated soul is also central to Marguerite Porete's *Mirror* in the medieval period.

In large part, this essay has focused on mystical action in the English medieval mystical tradition, to which the Middle English translation of *The Mirror* belongs. Here mystical actions constitute acting unawares, being closely linked to the notions of mystical annihilation and deification, as is also the case in the thought of Ruusbroec and Julian of Norwich. This is true too of the Monk of Farne, although for him the point where action and contemplation coincide causes the body to fail to such an extent that death results. The medieval English author who writes most extensively about contemplative action is Richard Rolle. While he encourages beginners to avoid ordinary actions and activities, he argues that more advanced mystics, who have achieved inner stability, can engage in worldly activities without being distracted from their unitive encounter with God. In suggesting this, we see Rolle's debt to Desert Spirituality. There is, as just noted, even the suggestion that because contemplative action is driven by love, love is never idle. [107]

While there is clearly variation in terms of what constitutes contemplative action, all the medieval writers discussed here clearly differentiate ordinary from contemplative actions, with Ruusbroec and the anonymous *Cloud*-Author stressing that contemplative actions are not imaginative and/or frenetic spiritual practices. Mystical actions arise from the calm of contemplative union and differ from ordinary actions in terms of their source if not necessarily their form. Despite this, discussion of contemplative action is almost entirely absent from the scholarly literature on medieval English mysticism. [108]

Indeed, as noted by Katz, the relationship between action and contemplation is often missing in contemporary scholarly discussions of mysticism *per se*. It comes, therefore, as something of a surprise to find that early twentieth-century Western theorists of mysticism, including William James, drew attention to this idea. Neither is the idea overlooked in the writings of important twentieth-century mystics such as Howard Thurman and Thomas Merton. Merton's writings, like Underhill's, shaped the thought of generations of practitioners. It seems strange that the connection is not more widely heralded. This possibly bears witness to the prevailing academic notion of mysticism as individual and inner. Yet given the wide variety of examples amassed in this essay, it is perhaps time to add the expression 'social mysticism' to our vocabulary when describing key traits of the Christian mystical tradition. In a modern world characterised by what Charles Taylor has called "the modern subjective turn," where the relationship with the communal and social is so often overlooked, and where mysticism, including its Christian iterations, is often reduced to ineffable experiences encountered in individual solitude, social mysticism acts as an important corrective. It also offers interesting avenues through which to pursue inter-religious dialogue via concepts such as 'non-doing' in Daoist and other Eastern mystical traditions. It is hoped that this essay will invigorate greater discussion of this topic, shifting the way in which mysticism is defined across its history. [109]

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