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## Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh, ed., THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

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with Derrida and Dionysius to make the case that we need to show more humility in our epistemic commitments and more hospitality in our ethical ones. Though far too rare in our social contexts, such virtues are hardly unacknowledged as beneficial for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would term our “life together.” Hence, despite my substantive agreement with Newheiser’s specific claims about Derrida, Dionysius, and democracy, without a more developed account of the “what” toward which the “how” of our hope is directed, I remain a bit underwhelmed by where Newheiser takes us. Undoubtedly, what he says about the need for hope is right, but the specifics of what such hope involves either need to be filled in more concretely, or he needs to make a case for why Derrida and Dionysius are required for seeing humility, hospitality, and openness as social goods.

My critical objections notwithstanding, this book is excellent and I recommend it to anyone in political theology, philosophy of religion, or political theory. Even if it doesn’t get us all the way to the mountain top, it does provide important resources for the climb.

*The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, edited by Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 719. \$150.00 (hardcover).

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Although there is much of value in this 700+-page handbook, at the end of the day, what this volume passes over in silence renders it more a testament to exclusion than a go-to source for state-of-the-art essays on mystical theology. The volume is simply called *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, for instance, but a more accurate title would be *The Oxford Handbook of Western Christian Mystical Theology*: “Western” because only a few chapters even mention the immensely important Eastern mystical theological Christian traditions that stretch from late antiquity through today; “Christian” since the volume doesn’t address mystical theology in Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or other traditions. In fact, (Western) Christian mystical theology’s *connections* to those traditions are also passed over almost entirely in silence. This omission is especially striking in the Jewish and Islamic cases, given that Jewish, Islamic, and Christian mysticisms have a long and important history of interaction and draw on many of the same texts (e.g., the Pentateuch, the book of Daniel and the other proph-



ets, the Song of Songs, and the books of Wisdom). Also ignored is Western Christianity's *Protestant* mystical theological traditions: although a chapter by Bernard McGinn at least mentions some Reformation-era mystics, not a word is said in the entire volume about the rich history of Pentecostal African American mystical theology or African mystical theologies more generally.

If the handbook omitted "only" these traditions, that would already be cause for serious pause. Unfortunately, the absence of voices from *outside* Roman Catholic and Anglican/Episcopalian mystical theological traditions is matched by the regular omission of voices *within* it, most notably the voices of women, people of color, LGBT+ folx, and members of other marginalized groups. The volume is made up of thirty-three chapters, divided into four parts: 1) Understanding Mystical Theology, 2) Sources, Contexts, and Practices, 3) Key Patterns of Mystical Thought, and 4) Mysticism and Theology. In what follows, I concentrate first on the strengths and weaknesses of each section and then the volume taken as a whole, and then I conclude with an explanation of why—despite the positive value of what *is* here—I believe that the cumulative effect of its omissions makes calling this "the" handbook of mystical theology not merely misleading but pernicious.

Part One—Understanding Mystical Theology—is comprised of five chapters: the first three are meant to provide a general understanding of what mystical theology is (the volume begins with an essay by Rowan Williams and is followed by essays by each of the editors), while the next two chapters give overviews of its history (Bernard McGinn covers late antiquity through the early modern period, while Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer tackles the modern and contemporary period). It's worth noting at the outset that, although these chapters serve as the volume's introduction to mystical theology, they are not pitched in any way at an introductory level. Instead, they drop the reader into the deep end of advanced conversations in the theological swimming pool. This is perfectly appropriate for an Oxford Handbook, but fair warning: most chapters in this volume would make quite hard going for readers not already familiar with either mysticism or Christian theology. That said, McGinn's "Genealogy of Mystical Theologies" provides an excellent overview of the main mystical traditions in Western Christianity from late antiquity through the early modern period, and Lucchetti Bingemer's "Mystical Theology in Contemporary Perspective" (which I discuss in more detail below) is one of the most accessible and exciting chapters in the whole volume.

Part Two—Sources, Contexts, and Practices—is comprised of eight chapters addressing such vital issues as "Living the Word," "Mystics as Teachers," and "Prayer." It's a bit of a grab-bag, however, in that there are large gaps in the coverage of all three of this section's stated topics. The chapters that most directly address sources, for instance, are Patricia Beckman's "Lives and Visions," Rob Faesen's "Mystical Texts," and Alexander Hampton's "Mystical Poetics," but even Faesen's sweeping (and

rather idiosyncratic) treatment of mystical texts from late antiquity through the 17<sup>th</sup> century can't hope to cover adequately the wide range of mystical sources that aren't lives, visions, or poems (which include letters, treatises, meditations, sermons, "sister-books," and much more). Beckman's and Hampton's pieces, however, both provide fantastic examples of how rewarding close examinations of mystical texts can be. Beckman's piece, for instance, looks at how the lives and visions of Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Annie Dillard are designed to draw readers to participate in their own transformations: "The invitation is to "take up and read," and to find in these lives and teachings a rich vision for mindful, direct encounter" (220). Hampton's chapter focuses on the mystical poetry of Dante, Jacopone da Todi, Hadewijch, and Angelus Silensus and ends with a poem by Andam Zagajewski (a contemporary Polish poet) to demonstrate how mystical poetry uses the rhythms of Christian liturgy and experience to draw everyone in, from expert to novice. Luke Dysinger also provides a wonderfully balanced discussion of the ascetic life and ascetic practices, arguing that their applicability today lies in calling the modern reader to "sharpen [our] awareness of the preciousness and irreplaceable nature of present opportunities and relationships" (167).

The other components of this section are rather less successful, however. The only chapters that address "Contexts" seem to be the disappointingly flat and myopic chapters by Kevin Hughes on "Living the Word" and the chapter by Andrew Louth on "The Liturgical Mystery." (I should be clear, though, that this is entirely conjecture on my part, as it's not at all clear from the organization or labeling of this section which of the chapters are meant to fall in this category, and the editors provide no clues in their introduction.) One might have hoped for some discussions of the varied historical, religious, social, and political contexts in which Christian mysticism and mystical theology has waxed and waned, but there's none of that in this volume.

The treatment of mystical practices gets similarly short shrift: even if we count Dysinger's chapter on the ascetic life, Peter Tyler's chapter on prayer and throw in Joanne Maguire's "Mystics as Teachers" and Hughes's "Living the Word," there's no explicit coverage of the practices of *lectio divina*, meditation, or contemplation. This is especially perplexing given that this is a volume on mystical theology, and those constitute three of the four central spiritual practices in the history of Catholic (and Reformed!) mystical theology. (*The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, by contrast, provides excellent treatments of all four spiritual disciplines and also a number of accessibly-written chapters that provide important context for the understanding Christian mysticism. I recommend it highly to readers wanting to learn more about these topics.) As a whole, this section fails to provide the curious reader with anything approaching a holistic understanding of the sources, contexts, or practices of mystical theology. Fortunately, the third section—Key Patterns of Mystical Thought—does better.

Like Part II, Part III is also made up of eight chapters, but they're much more evenly balanced and address many of the most important themes in mystical theology, including how human beings image God, the idea of spiritual journeys/itineraries, the mystical use of eroticism and nuptial imagery, the concepts of depth, ground, and abyss, and differing conceptions of mystical union. The concepts of cataphasis and apophasis each get their own chapter (written by David Albertson and Cyril O'Regan, respectively), and I recommend Albertson's piece to anyone interested in religious uses of spatial metaphors. As he notes, "Practices of [cataphatic] visualization effectively fashion virtual spaces, which in turn require imaginal mapping, annotation, and navigation. In this way, cataphatic mystical theology becomes a kind of topology or cartography of visualized mystical space" (349). The chapter should also prove interesting to anyone wanting to learn more about cataphasis, the undervalued underdog of mystical theology over the past century or so.

The strength of this section lies in its choice of topics. Its weakness lies in how often the discussions of those topics omit the contributions of women and other marginalized groups—despite these topics being the very ones on which people from those groups have spoken so eloquently. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, for instance, spends an entire chapter on Trinitarian indwelling without even *mentioning* Julian of Norwich; Charlotte Radler talks about depth, ground, and abyss in Eckhart and others without even paying lip service to Hadewijch and Marguerite Porete's influence on those authors; and Cyril O'Regan talks about theological epistemology and apophasis in both the "intellectualist" and the "affective" traditions without naming a single woman—not even Theresa of Avila, who so often serves as the sole representative for her sex in mystical contexts. (And that's just to mention a very few of the important voices that are ignored here.)

The fourth and final part of this volume—Mysticism and Theology—has as its stated aim to demonstrate "the central contributions of mystical teaching to theology and metaphysics" (4). (It's unfortunate that the editors don't tell us what they mean by "metaphysics.") This is the longest section, composed of twelve chapters, and it contains several of the best pieces in the volume. I particularly recommend Amy Hollywood and Rachel Smith's "Christology" (which I discuss in more detail below), Philp Sheldrake's "Anthropology" (which presents a nuanced picture of how various Christian mystical traditions have understood human nature and its relation to God), Aristotle Papanikolaou's "Theosis" (an excellent discussion of the concept of divinization in Eastern as well as Western Christian mystical traditions), and Michael Barnes's "Interreligious Dialogue" (which demonstrates a keen practical as well as theoretical understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in such dialogues). These chapters inspire as well as educate; they make it clear how deep and rich and *powerful* mysticism and mystical theology can be. Unfortunately, these chapters make up the minority rather than the majority of the section, and their impact is rather drowned out by that

majority. Gemma Simmonds's "Ecclesiology" is almost unreadably disjointed, for instance, Rik Van Nieuwenhove and William Crozier's "The Trinity" repeats much of what Van Nieuwenhove says in his chapter on Trinitarian Indwelling without adding much else of value, and Ann Astell's "Mysticism of the Social Life"—although it presents an interesting history of Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi's* effect on mystical theology in the Second World War—is disappointingly narrowly focused.

Taken as a whole, the structure of the book is solid; the editors have done a good job, particularly in sections three and four, of addressing the central aspects of mystical theology. There is also a welcome emphasis throughout the book on the continuing relevance and potentially transformative power of mystical theology for the Christian life. As the editors of the book note in the introduction, one of the main purposes of the volume is to present mystical theology as "a doorway into a living, transformative encounter with the divine reality to which, Christians believe, their theological language is meant to point" (3). The volume also contains a number of chapters written by prominent figures in Catholic and Anglican mystical theology, such as Rowan Williams, Jean-Luc Marion, Andrew Louth, Bernard McGinn, and Cyril O'Regan. Sadly, the book is often at its worst in these chapters, which tend to simply rehash old debates and views. (Marion's chapter, for instance, is largely a response to Heidegger's phenomenology.) There is, of course, value to including essays by such eminent scholars, but the essays included here do not represent their best work.

The best chapters in the volume breathe life into their topic and show rather than merely tell the scope and power of mysticism and mystical theology. Take, for example, the chapter by Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, which provides a shining exception to the volume's frequent exclusion of women and people of color. In her words: "Whatever their states of life, social statuses, or intellectual capacities, contemporary mystics. . .delight in plunging right into the disfigured reality of public, "secular," space, seeking to shape it according to the mystery of God's love that they experience as a gift and grace" (102). In Lucchetti Bingemer's treatment of the vibrant growth of mystical theology in the global south, we catch a glimpse of what this handbook could have been: an inspiring collection of essays that pay homage to figures and movements of the past while also drawing their views into dialogue with the people around the globe who are continuing these vital conversations today.

Amy Hollywood and Rachel Smith's chapter on Christology provides another stirring example of how mystical theology can speak truth to power. This is one of the very few chapters that draws explicit attention to how theology has often split along gendered lines, and it notes how often contemporary theologians shunt aside provocative mystical imagery, pushing it away from theology proper into other, "softer," theological sub-disciplines. As they write, "Rather than dismissing the



notion of God as mother out of hand. . . scholars uncomfortable with such imagery cordon it off into the domain of spirituality or devotion, places in which purportedly theological imprecise language can work to comfort and persuade without being taken as “true” (484–485, added emphasis). Hollywood and Smith then go on to demonstrate, drawing on both male and female authors, how much more radical medieval mystical views of Christology are than we modern readers have been taught to appreciate.

Several other chapters also demonstrate mystical theology’s relevance to struggles within the broader field of theology and/or the modern world. While the chapter explicitly addressing mystical theology’s connection to social life looks exclusively at a papal encyclical’s impact on WWII Europe, for instance, Michael Barnes’s chapter on interfaith dialogue offers practical as well as theoretical wisdom concerning how mystical theology can offer a way into living with oneself and one’s neighbors.

Taken as a whole, however, the chapters which do provide a balanced approach to the voices that have shaped and are shaping (even just Catholic) Christian mystical theology do more to draw attention to the lack of such inclusion in other chapters than they do to balance things out. Tragically few of the chapters that bring in contemporary figures such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri De Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Thomas Merton, for instance, reach beyond those men to engage the contributions of either individual people from marginalized groups or feminist, Womanist, Black, Latinx, or queer theologies. (To be clear, this is not because those people and theologies don’t exist or are hard to find.) Only sixty-eight of the four hundred and eighty-one names who appear in the Name Index belong to women; running the same numbers for people of color, people in the LBGT+ community, and/or other marginalized groups yields even worse results.

Here’s why I believe we should consider these omissions *pernicious* as opposed to simply unfortunate. Both the introductory section and the volume as a whole place mysticism and mystical theology at the very center of Christianity itself. As Mark McIntosh writes: “We might say that mystical theology *is* the heart of Christian theology” (27, original emphasis). Furthermore, mysticism and mystical theology have long been one of the few loci in Christian institutions in which people otherwise denied a voice can speak truth to power—and be heard. Mysticism is focused not on intensive study of academic texts and hierarchical systems of knowledge, but on widely accessible practices such as meditation and contemplative prayer and on personal experience of God; these are available to anyone who wants to participate in them. Because mystical experiences and knowledge of God’s hidden truths are granted by God as an act of grace and remain out of the grasp of human beings working on their own power, the theology of mysticism can *never* be simply the purview of the powerful elite: it is available to anyone *and everyone* God chooses. And, as even the most cursory glance at the history of Christianity demonstrates, God chooses people of all ages, races, classes, genders, and sexual orientations.

Mysticism and mystical theology allow the disenfranchised to connect directly with God and to God's own authority in their love-filled striving to unsettle the unjust status quos of this world. (Think, for instance, of how Catherine of Siena, the twenty-fourth child of a Sieneese cloth-dyer, becomes an influential political figure as well as a spiritual teacher and a Doctor of the Catholic church.) Yet the chapters in this Handbook overwhelmingly present the impression that the people to whom God most often grants grace and authority are white men in positions of authority and power (bishops, monks, academic theologians, and church fathers). In the context of mysticism's broader role in Christian theology, this representation is not just misleading—it is actively harmful.

Perhaps the true value of this volume is that it demonstrates what the field of mystical theology looks like from a certain perspective—one whose privilege remains largely invisible to itself, and whose calls to transformation and new life often remain separated from meaningful engagement with the vast majority of the earth's population. Essays which fossilize existing debates are not likely to draw newcomers into the vital project of guiding people towards "a doorway into a living, transformative encounter with the divine reality" (3), even if they accurately capture the contours of a dominant part of the academic field's past. One is left hoping that the book demonstrates enough of the vibrant and inclusive work (both past and present) of mystical theology that it starts more fruitful conversations than it shuts down.

*Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration*, by William Lane Craig. Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 318. \$24.95 (hardcover).

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In recent years the penal substitutionary model of atonement has received much attention from philosophers and analytic theologians. Numerous articles and chapters have been dedicated to raising objective critiques of the model—that is, critiques that concern the problematic elements of the model itself rather than problematic effects that the model might have on individuals or on society. As with any philosophically significant theological doctrine there have also been attempts shore up this model against its objectors. Most of these defensive maneuvers have been confined to articles and chapters. Yet, William Lane Craig provides a comprehensive,

