

“Not by force of Armes”: Mysticism and Confessional Conflict in the English Counter-Reformation

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Religious reform in western Europe in the early modern period has tended to be viewed against the backdrop of the conflicts and controversies which afflicted different territories in the period between the 1540s and 1640s, as an outworking of confessional change. The “religion” of early modern people – an extraordinarily loose category – is often accessed through the polemic, propaganda, and other political or controversial genres which contributed to inter-confessional hostilities. There is a rich seam of recent research, however, dedicated to exploring early modern religion not in terms of conflict or of top-down, state-led processes of “confessionalization”, but in terms of devotional practice, domestic piety, local negotiation, and cooperation across confessional lines. As a recent review article put it, “Contrary to widely held notions of the age as relentlessly divisive, doctrinal differences did not always structure religious (or other) interactions. Whereas irenicism as a theological strand has long been celebrated for its pursuit of an elusive interconfessional peace, scholars within and beyond the mold of confessionalization have started to explore a whole range of everyday practices” which supported a more irenical approach.¹ Among other strategies for managing difference, some research has illustrated how, in confessionally vexed contexts: “devotional texts actively pursued a vision of inclusive Christianity”.² In connection with the English Reformation, several studies have given examples of the confessional ambiguity of devotional writing, as it drew on the late-medieval spiritual resources which had

¹ Helmut Puff, “Belief in the Reformation Era: Reflections on the State of Confessionalization”, in *Central European History*, 51:1 (2018), 48.

² *Ibid.*, with reference to the work of Ute Lotz-Heumann and Matthias Pohlig, in “Confessionalization and Literature in the Empire, 1555-1700”, in *Central European History*, 40:1 (2007), 35-61.



provided inspiration for both Catholic and Protestant reform.³ In this article, I look at editions and translations of mystical texts by Catholics at a time of aggressive anti-popish public discourse, the late Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, and consider the significance of the military imagery used in this “peaceful war”. While it is undoubtedly the case that Catholic mysticism could be weaponized by its editors as part of an arsenal of apologetic instruments, there was also an increasingly conscious intention among those promoting mystical spirituality to abstain from, or at least navigate a way through, religious division and sterile controversy. The cost of such an ambition was institutional suspicion.

Mystical Translations and Confessional Difference

The effort to define and disseminate an authoritative corpus of mystical texts as an engine of reform and defence against heresy had its origins in the crisis of the early sixteenth century. From the beginnings of the Reformation, the publication of mystical works aimed at both spiritual renewal and at resistance to evangelical dissent. Famously, the Carthusian house of St Barbara in Cologne became a hub of printing activity from the mid-1520s, producing a large number of original mystical works alongside influential editions of the Rhineland mystics: Tauler, Ruysbroeck, Harp. The spiritual theology of the Carthusians, and the devotional writers they patronised, upheld the “freedom of the will, the necessity of self-denial and the possibility of union with God”, and was intended to stand as a powerful bulwark against Lutheran teachings.⁴ Mystical theology, particularly that of the fifteenth-century devotional writer and scholastic theologian Denys the Carthusian, was deployed by the Cologne Charterhouse against the Anabaptists of Münster.⁵ The Cologne project found an echo, if not an exact parallel, in the publishing activities of English Catholic reformers, especially in their works of translation. The focus of the translators was on disseminating contemporary devotional writings – especially those which emerged from the Spanish “golden age”. As Alexandra Walsham has observed, these “ostensibly apolitical works of devotion”, professing to cultivate “repentance and piety” rather than foment controversy, could be seen as “subtle and sophisticated exercises in sect formation.”⁶ Walsham suggests that, in large part thanks to this print campaign, “the piety of recusant households was primarily inward-looking and devotional in tone, a religion perhaps rooted more in prayers and self-regulated programmes

³ See, for instance, Max von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425-1650: From Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller* (London: Routledge, 2011); Miriam Castillo, “Catholic Translation and Protestant Translation: The Reception of Luis de Granada’s Devotional Prose in Early Modern England”, in *Translation and Literature* (2017), 26/2, pp. 145-61.

⁴ Carlos Eire, “Early modern Catholic piety in translation”, in Peter Burke and R. Po-chi Hsia eds., *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*, 91.

⁵ See Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of “Savage Wolves”: Anabaptist Münster and the German Reformation During the 1530s* (Boston, MA: Humanities Press, 2000), 60-69.

⁶ Alexandra Walsham, *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 257-261.

of spiritual exercise than in sacramental observances".⁷ The circulation of books focused on the inner life of the faith helped to nurture a collective identity among dispersed and isolated British Catholics, which could be maintained in the absence of common acts of worship.

In many cases, these texts seem to have been intended to strengthen the resolve of those loyal to Rome by confronting Protestant piety and spiritual discipline directly, especially those described as "Puritans" in the English Church, and to discredit the spirituality of Protestants as barren and fraudulent. Mysticism was made central to the reforming (and counter-reforming) enterprise of British Catholics claiming the authenticating stamp of the Holy Spirit. It would be distorting to characterise the Catholic promotion of spiritual renewal as simply defensive and reactionary, part of the fallout of confessional politics alongside printed polemics. To argue that many Catholic activists regarded spiritually edifying literature as their best weapon against the Protestants is not to suggest that their campaign was cynical or merely tactical. Their professed aim was to deepen the orthodox spirituality of the Catholic faithful and to effect true conversion of the heart; to bring about the kind of "reformation" pioneered by Spanish mystics in their own age. Naturally enough, they regarded Protestant spirituality – the fruit of heresy and schism, as they saw it – as seriously deficient. The Jesuit missionary Robert Parsons, hardly an impartial commentator, complained in 1582 of "the greate want of spirituall bookes in Englande, for the direction of men to pietie and devotion".⁸ Such a dearth of practical resources for the spiritual life provided fertile ground for mission and engagement; more fertile, arguably, than the field of theological disputation. Richard Hopkins, the translator and editor of several works by Luis de Granada, explained his publishing activity in terms of spiritual reformation, insisting that:

more spirituall profite wolde undoutedlie ensewe thereby to the gayninge of Christian sowles in our countrie from Schisme, and Heresie, and from all sinne, and iniquitie, than by bookes that treate of controversies in Religion: wich (as experience hath nowe plainelie tried) doe nothinge so well dispose the common peoples myndes to the feare, love and service of almightie God, as bookes treatinge of devotion, and howe to leade a vertuous life doe.⁹

Elsewhere, Hopkins expressed his view that "the right assured way to reforme Christendome, beinge at this present so farre corrupted in every Countrey, is not by force of Armes, nor by terror, & constraint of greivous penal lawes, forfeitures, confiscations, & executions with terrible deaths: because the Christian Commonwealth in such a general corruption of al estats, it cannot by any other means be dewlie reformed, mainteyned, and preserved, but by such as it was at the first founded, and increased." The peaceful discipline of St Benedict, St Bernard, St Dominic, and

⁷ Ibid., 281.

⁸ Robert Parsons, *The first booke of the Christian exercise appertayning to resolution* (s.l., 1582), 1.

⁹ Richard Hopkins, dedicatory letter in Luis de Granada, *Of prayer, and meditation* (s.l., 1582), 6-7.

St Francis provided the best guide to the “godlie order of proceeding for Reformation of the Christian State”.¹⁰ Hopkins did not, however, entirely discard a controversial or polemical tone. His printed translations provided a platform to rail against “this newe Calvinistical pretended reformed Religion” with its licentious doctrine of justification leading whole nations into error in the evil latter days, and especially those agents of Satan, the Puritans.¹¹

English editions of Teresa of Avila’s “Life” similarly emphasised the value of such spiritual works in challenging heresy. Her translators described her achievements as a reformer in terms of an apocalyptic “miracle” given by God at a time of general apostasy and cosmic crisis as Satan’s forces gathered strength. A 1611 translation, thought to be the work of the English Jesuit Michael Walpole, suggested that her claims to have been gifted with miraculous revelation were confirmed rather than undermined by her gender.¹²

For since it belongeth not to women to teach, but to be taught, as S. Paul writeth it presently appeareth a new wonder, that a weak woman should be so couragious, as to undertake so great an affayre, and so wise & of such efficacy, that she should bring it to passe, and robbe the hearts of those, who treated with her, to geve them to God, and draw so many after her, to all that which sense abhorreth. In which, so farre as I can judge, God vouchsafed in this time, when the devil seemeth to triumph in the multitude of infidels, which follow him, & in the pertinacy of so many hereticall people, which take his part, & in the many vices of the faithfull, which are on his syde, for his greater mockery and contempt, to set before him not a valyant man armed with learning, but a poor & solitary woman, who should defy him, and lift up a banner against him, and publikely gather souldiours, which should overcome, vanquish, and beat him down, and he vouchsafed without doubt for the greater demonstration of his power in this age, where so many thousands of men, some with their erring wittes, & others with their wicked lives impugne his kingdome, that a woman should enlighten the understandings, and order the customes of many, which every day encrease to repayre these ruines.¹³

The trope of a poor, pious mystic woman armed with her sanctity, confronting and overcoming the “erring wittes” of an apostate age, is strikingly militaristic. In this instance, the military imagery is deliberately counterintuitive and illustrates the futility of the worldly strategies of actual force or violence, in contrast to the spiritual warfare which would effect true reformation. That “a weak

¹⁰ Richard Hopkins, “The Translatours Dedicatory Epistle”, in Luis de Granada, *A memoriall of a Christian life* (Rouen, 1586), 4-5.

¹¹ Hopkins, *Of prayer, and meditation*, 16.

¹² Some scholars have identified “W.M.” as the Irish Jesuit William Malone; the attribution remains uncertain.

¹³ W.M., “The Epistle Dedicatorie”, in Teresa of Avila, *The lyf of the mother Teresa of Jesus* (Antwerp, 1611), §2v-3r.

woman” should wield such authority authenticated the divine source of her empowerment. Teresa’s editor rejoiced that in the present darkness, “the Religious women shine like greater lights among the smaller starres; for as a blessed woman began the reformation, so the women thereof, seem in all to have the preheminance”.¹⁴ Despite this affirmation of Teresa’s authenticity, the editor was keenly aware that mystical visions “above ordinary discourse” were regarded with suspicion. He anticipated that some would object that “revelations are doubtfull”, and that “the interiour conversation of the soul with God, is a very spirituall busynesse, and of few, and that the publishing of it to all, may be an occasion of danger, in which verely they are deceived”.¹⁵

A later translation of Teresa’s spiritual autobiography, *The Flaming Hart* by Sir Tobie Matthew (1642), reproduced verbatim some passages from the earlier English edition, and echoed the view that “this Blessed Woeman was stirred-up by God’s holie Spirit, in this Age of ours, for the redresse of our moderne, great disorders”, and “that his Divine Majestie had a minde to be most particularly served, and glorified by it”. It was a miracle of the Spirit that a woman was raised up “to passe through so manie impediments, and to winne the Prize” in these “present, most depraved times”.¹⁶ Produced in the period after Teresa’s canonisation in 1622, Matthew admits no reference to the doubtful status of visions, and adds hagiographical flourishes, describing Teresa as a spiritual “Gyantesse” comparable in stature to Augustine; he even ventures to juxtapose Teresa’s revelations with those of St John, “which are incomparably more repugnant, both to reason and even to Common sense, then anie thing, which is related heer.”¹⁷ As Roy Norton has recently noted, Matthew’s Teresa spoke with quite a different voice from the Teresa of the Spanish *Vida*. Whereas in the Spanish she was hesitant or tentative about interpreting her own visions, in the English she was categorical and forthright; Matthew made her speak in a voice “more ordered, learned, and magisterial than the original”; a voice perhaps even “defeminized”.¹⁸ The English Teresa was the strident mouthpiece of Catholic self-assertion at a time of religious crisis.

Sir Tobie Matthew had been waging a peaceful battle with Protestants over three decades, in the form of a steady flow of translations of saints’ lives and spiritual works. His contribution to the translation campaign of the English Counter-Reformation illustrates the extent to which contemporary mystical literature was conscripted as an arm of apologetic. Matthew, the son of a senior Elizabethan churchman of the same name, was probably converted by Robert Parsons, among others, during a visit to Rome in 1605-7; he was subsequently ordained priest in the Roman

¹⁴ Ibid., §**1r.

¹⁵ Ibid., §**3r-**3v

¹⁶ Tobie Matthew, “Preface of the translatur, to the Christian, and civil reader”, in *The flaming hart, or the life of the glorious S. Teresa* (Antwerp, 1642), §***6r-v.

¹⁷ Ibid., §**8v.

¹⁸ Roy Norton, “Sir Tobie Matthew’s *Flaming Hart*: Translating St Teresa for the English Catholic Exiles”, in *Translation and Literature* (2018), 27/1, pp. 11-12, 23.

Church in 1614 by Cardinal Bellarmine. Remarkably, despite two periods of exile during James I's reign, he was knighted in October 1623 for his assistance in the negotiations for the doomed Spanish match.¹⁹ Though he continually protested his loyalty to the English king, Matthew's published works were uncompromising in their hostility towards Protestant theology and spirituality. This is no less true of his editions of contemporary Spanish and Italian spiritual biographies and mystical writings (notably the spiritual manuals of Alphonso Rodriguez) than it is of his more openly apologetic works. His edition of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi's *Vita* was the occasion for a strong defence of penance against the Protestant libertines, and, according to a contemporary, circulated widely and bore "great fruit" among English Catholics.²⁰ Matthew also produced a new edition of Augustine's *Confessions*, the blueprint for spiritual autobiography in the early modern world, which was a defiant answer to Thomas Rogers' Reformed versions of Pseudo-Augustine.²¹ It included an extensive preface insistently repudiating the adoption of Augustine as "the patron of any Calvinisticall opinion against the Catholikes".²² In an original devotional treatise *Of the love of our only Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ* (1622), Matthew addressed both Catholic and Protestant readers, claiming that:

this Treatise is not intended, for the setting of the truth of the Catholike faith, and to conuince them of errour, who in pugne it; but only to inflame the hart of the true Christian to heate of loue, vpon those reasons and motiues, which are already ministred, by the light of faith to our soules. That other taske, hath bene performed by multitudes of our learned Authors, wherof the world is ful.²³

Nonetheless, Matthew could not refrain from frequent polemical asides aimed at "sectaries" and "Calvinists".

The apologetic and polemic framing of the translations and devotional manuals could not quite mark the stark boundary between Protestant and Catholic spirituality which their editors sought to establish. The works of Teresa of Avila were not favoured by Protestant readers, perhaps because of their female authorship but also their visionary content, in contrast to the more practical spiritual instruction available from the Jesuits. Robert Parsons' own defining contribution to the print campaign, the *Book of Christian Exercise* or *Christian Directory*, distributed from his

¹⁹ On Tobie Matthew, see James Doelman, *King James I and the Religious Culture of England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 110-111.

²⁰ See Clare Copeland, *Maria Maddalena De' Pazzi: The Making of a Counter-Reformation Saint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101.

²¹ On Rogers' editions of Pseudo-Augustine, see Julia Staykova, "Pseudo-Augustine and Religious Controversy in Early Modern England" in Karla Pollmann and Meredith Gill eds., *Augustine Beyond the Book: Intermediality, Transmediality, and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 147-166.

²² Tobie Matthew, "The Preface to the Reader" in Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of the incomparable doctour S. Augustine*, trans. Tobie Matthew (Saint-Omer, 1620), 79.

²³ Tobie Matthew, *Of the love of our only Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ* (1622), 294.

clandestine press at Stonor Park, was a powerful exhortation to inward reformation or “resolution”: the earnest intention of the heart to serve God. It was designed to preface a book of spiritual instruction by the Italian Jesuit Gaspar de Loarte, translated by Stephen Brinkley in 1579 as *The Exercise of a Christian Life*.²⁴ Parsons’s work became a spiritual handbook in its own right, and inspired a copycat Calvinist edition by Edmund Bunny, who sought to “purge it of certaine points that carryed ... some manifest error”, so that “the reading thereof might ... carry no hurt or danger withall”.²⁵ The reforming revisions included the excision of defences of clerical celibacy, and the substitution of “repentance” for “penance and satisfaction”. Parsons complained that Bunny’s version, which had gone through 32 editions by 1639, “maketh me to speak after the phrase of Protestantes ... like a good minister of England”.²⁶

The fact that a Jesuit missionary and polemicist could, through certain strategic editorial interventions, be made to speak in the voice of a good Protestant minister, is indicative of the confessional ambiguity surrounding the discourse of spiritual discipline at this juncture. Even when framed by apologetic arguments, mystical theology was a problematic field, and its proponents within the Catholic world were frequently and increasingly under suspicion for holding heterodox views. The enthusiastic Protestant reception of some of these texts before the civil wars, and their adoption of contemporary mystical themes and disciplines such as “mental prayer”, illustrates this ambiguity. Common themes and aspirations linked Reformed and certain Catholic writers, especially Jesuits: a thirst for devotional and moral rigour, for interior mortification; an appetite for introspection and self-examination; a strong focus on penance and transformation of life. Pointing out that Richard Baxter was inspired by reading Bunny’s Reformed edition of the *Christian Exercise*, Theodore Dwight Bozeman has argued that the main effect of the Catholic devotional crusade was to “strengthen Protestant resources”.²⁷ He suggests that the first generation of Puritans adapted and absorbed the traditional mystical motif of the “via purgativa”, and in doing so “fostered not so much a new tradition of piety as a separate evolution of the old.”²⁸ In both Catholic and Protestant devotional writing, mystical theology was woven into schemes for practical spiritual instruction to assist the faithful in the life of prayer. “Inward reformation” – a phrase frequently employed by early Stuart religious writers, among them Benet of Canfield, Edmund Bunny and the English translator of Calvin’s commentary on Hebrews – was an essential counterpart to the

²⁴ Gaspar de Loarte, *The Exercise of a Christian Life*, trans. Stephen Brinkley (London, 1579); see Victor Houlston, *Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons’s Jesuit Polemic, 1580-1610* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 33-35.

²⁵ Edmund Bunny, *A booke of Christian exercise, appertaining to resolution* (London, 1584), §A2r.

²⁶ Robert Parsons, *A Christian directorie guiding men to their salvation* (s.l., 1585), §B4r; see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

outward processes of reform or confessionalisation.²⁹ Parsons' *Directory* perhaps had as much in common with the emerging genre of Puritan practical divinity as with the mystical theology expounded by mainland Catholic reformers; and indeed, this very distinction is hard to draw clearly before the 1620s and 30s.

Similarly versatile were the devotional writings of the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada (1504-1588). The case of Luis de Granada's reception by English Catholics and Protestants has been extensively and rewardingly explored in several recent studies, but it is worth revisiting briefly in order to illuminate changing attitudes towards mystical theology across the seventeenth century.³⁰ Unlike a number of other leading Hispanic reformers, notably Teresa of Avila (as mentioned above) and John of the Cross, whose radically apophatic mysticism was not translated into English until the nineteenth century, Luis de Granada was astonishingly widely read and valued by both Catholic and Protestant audiences.³¹ As Alexandra Walsham has noted, he was not exactly an unproblematic mouthpiece for Tridentine reform, having been accused of teaching *alumbrado* doctrines, that is, mystical teachings subversive of traditional ceremonies and observances in their emphasis on interior revelation and the indifferent status of external institutions.³² His *Libro de la oración y meditación* (1554) was placed on the Spanish Inquisition's Index between 1559 and 1576. This was not, of course, an isolated case. As Henry Kamen comments, a "whole generation of spirituality ... fell under suspicion because of the supposed danger from illuminism"; not least because *alumbrado* mysticism became confusingly associated with Lutheran and Reformed theology.³³ Despite Luis de Granada's later explicit repudiation of Protestant doctrines, his teachings appealed to readers in Reformed England. His turn to a more ethical, penitential and practical focus in his devotional writings, and the careful excision of references to mental prayer, made his teachings less redolent of illuminism.

The evolution of mystical theology in the European Counter-Reformation, especially in the seventeenth century, has come to be seen in terms of the systematization of a discipline, and its

²⁹ See John Calvin, *A commentarie on the whole Epistle to the Hebrewes* (London, 1605), 168; Benet of Canfield, *The rule of perfection* (Rouen, 1609), 33; Edmund Bunny, *Of the head corner-stone* (London, 1611), 401.

³⁰ See Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 76; Alexandra Walsham, "Luis de Granada's Mission to Protestant England: Translating the Devotional Literature of the Spanish Counter-Reformation", in Teresa Bela, Clarinda Calma and Jolanta Rzegocka eds., *Publishing Subversive Texts in Elizabethan England and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), The Handpress World series vol. 39, 129-54; Miriam Castillo, "Catholic Translation and Protestant Translation: The Reception of Luis de Granada's Devotional Prose in Early Modern England", in *Translation and Literature* (2017), 26/2, pp. 145-61.

³¹ On the curious neglect of John of the Cross by contemporary translators, see Colin Thompson, "Dangerous Visions: The Experience of Teresa of Avila and the Teaching of John of the Cross" in Clare Copeland and Jan Machielson eds., *Angels of Light? Sanctity and the Discernment of Spirits in the Early Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 53-74.

³² Walsham, "Luis de Granada's Mission", 133-34.

³³ Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 97.

uneasy reconciliation to (or domestication by) an austere and authoritarian orthodoxy. Coinciding with the response to the Protestant schism, institutional opposition to mysticism and illuminism was manifest in a series of milestones: the suppression of the *alumbrados* from 1524, and the censorship of the texts of the *Spirituali* in the 1540s, the interrogation of several Spanish mystics of the Golden Age by the Inquisition in the later sixteenth century, and ultimately the condemnation of Quietist teachings in 1687. For all the riches of early modern Hispanic mysticism, the Catholic Church was not consistently hospitable to the claim to a direct mystical enlightenment. As Euan Cameron puts it in a recent study of mysticism in the age of reform, this claim “loses most credibility, or exposes its adherents to greatest suspicion, in those epochs where disputes over doctrine cast the cohesion of the ecclesial community into doubt”.³⁴ This is perhaps most true not only at times but also in places where doctrine is fiercely contested: Catholic reform in the English or the Dutch context at the turn of the seventeenth century was quite a different environment for mysticism than the reforming orders of late sixteenth-century Spain. The polemical use of mysticism against the new evangelical movement by the Carthusians and others could be seen as ironic, given that some of the same mystical authors (notably Tauler) had inspired not only Luther himself, but also the most revolutionary dissenters, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer among them. Although Luther ultimately rejected the perfectionist anthropology at the heart of mystical theology, the Taulerian emphasis on spiritual passivity, inward repentance and identification with Christ continued to shape Lutheran spirituality, especially that which followed the lead of Johann Arndt, as seventeenth-century Pietism consciously took its energies from the mystical tradition. Mystical theology came to occupy an ambiguous cross-confessional space, and its appropriation for polemical or apologetic purposes on either side became fraught with difficulty, given that both Catholic and Protestant magisterial reform had entailed some suppression of an illuministic strain.

This subversive potential in mysticism was recognised as part of its reception in the Protestant British Isles, but there remained a surprising openness to pre-Reformation and even contemporary Catholic mystical sources.³⁵ Theodore Bozeman has situated early Puritan spiritual writing within a “trans-confessional ‘devotional revival’ that swept both Catholic and Protestant Europe in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries”, and shown how it owed an unexpected debt to English Catholic translators.³⁶ Alec Ryrie has noted that the Calvinist churchman Joseph Hall’s wildly popular *Arte of Divine Meditation* (1606) drew extensively from Jean de Bruxelles’s *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium* (1494), a work which emerged from the Brethren of the Common Life and the *Devotio Moderna*. Ryrie describes this as “the watershed of the English Protestant

³⁴ Euan Cameron, “Ways of Knowing in the Pre- and Post-Reformation Worlds” in Sara S. Poor and Nigel Smith eds., *Mysticism and Reform, 1400-1750* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 30.

³⁵ See Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 234.

³⁶ Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 74.

meditative tradition”, but suggests that this was not a “prodigal’s return: impoverished Protestant spirituality recognizing the greater riches of contemporary Catholicism”; instead, spiritual traditions across the confessional divide enjoyed “a shared spiritual ancestry”.³⁷ Through his exposition of the discipline of meditation, Hall hoped to advance “devotion, and the practise of true piety”, in contrast to the less edifying influence of “Polemicall bookes” which tend “rather to breede, than ende strifes”; or of “those which are doctrinall” which tend “rather to oppresse than satisfie the Reader”.³⁸ His vision of meditation could be regarded as distinctly Protestant, as Ryrie argues: dynamic and active rather than passive and contemplative. Nonetheless, his advocacy of reformation through inner, devotional renewal, as opposed to persuasion through doctrinal controversy and polemic, shared much with the Catholic project to convince heretics peacefully through mystical literature.

Especially in these more volatile confessional settings, theorists of the science of contemplation (now classified as “mystics”), were apparently on the defensive, forced in published apologies and theoretical systems for mystical theology to justify their practices as legitimately catholic. The Dutch Jesuit Maximilian van der Sandt’s *Theologia Mystica* (1627) and *Pro theologia mystica clavis* (1640) are exemplary texts in this genre, aiming to demonstrate the compatibility between mystical and scholastic theology, and to clarify obscure terms. A key dimension of the process of “reinventing” mystical theology was, as Michel de Certeau has most compellingly shown, the development of language. One typical recent account describes how the generous language of contemplation was replaced by this more specific, technical terminology of *mystical theology*, a reference to the title of Dionysius the Areopagite’s influential fifth-century work, which “delineates the soul’s ascent to God as a systematic denial of earthly signs”.

Unlike *contemplative theology*, a roomy phrase which incorporates an indefinite number of modes of contemplation, *mystical theology* organized the discipline on hierarchic, pseudo-Dionysian principles, focusing fierce attention on union with God as the true goal of the contemplative, now for the first time termed a *mystic*. It was vital to theorize and to experience this *unio mystica* correctly, not least because mystical theology was more likely than earlier contemplative theologies to make esoteric and exceptionalist claims for itself: claims understood as dangerous in rather the sense prophecy was dangerous, constituting a mode of spiritual authority that might challenge the authority of the Church and its Scriptures.³⁹

³⁷ Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113-114.

³⁸ Joseph Hall, *The Arte of Meditation* (London, 1606), §A3v.

³⁹ Nicholas Watson, Introduction, in Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5-6.

Depending on one's perspective, the "mystic" was now either a trained professional in an esoteric science, or a maverick individual claiming a subjective, charismatic authority taking them outside the security of the universal Church. Often this contrast was gendered: the more unstable type of mystic was the female contemplative, her passivity and detachment making her vulnerable to other spiritual influences.⁴⁰

Augustine Baker and the Mystical Turn from Controversy

More than any other single individual in the English Counter-Reformation, the Benedictine spiritual writer Augustine Baker (1575-1641) contributed to the consolidation and self-consciousness of a "mystical way" after the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition in the English language, among both Catholic and Protestant readers. He translated anthologies of mystical writings and wrote guides to contemplation in the 1620s and 30s, while in exile in Cambrai and Douai. This was a period which has been described as one of "great trial for English Catholicism", despite the perception that "popery" was gathering strength, when steep fines were combined with popular hostility and even mob violence in the capital.⁴¹ Although the Catholic community seems to have grown during the Caroline period, it was under considerable pressure amid increasingly polarized religious politics. More widely, of course, these were the bloodiest decades of Europe's religious wars; even in a contemplative house in Northern France, it was not possible to be wholly insulated from these climactic events following generations of confessional turmoil. Baker's writings, so conspicuously disengaged from the politics of religion, were also significantly confined to manuscript publication until the 1650s, when an abridgement of his spiritual writings appeared as *Sancta Sophia* (1657), edited by the recent convert to Catholicism, Hugh or Serenus Cressy. Even now, some of Baker's writings are only accessible in scattered archives. The quietist method of contemplation and self-abnegation which he promoted was self-consciously anti-controversial, his refusal "to meddle in Secular affaires or Controuersies" extending to a critique and almost disavowal of the English mission.⁴² His experiences reflect the institutional marginalization of the mystical way in the seventeenth century in both Roman Catholicism and the Church of England, but the reception of his works also speaks for the powerful resonance of mystical theology, at a time when many sought a form of religion which transcended sordid secular politics. As the theorist who defined the development of both a mystical science and the figure of the "mystic" in English language, and contributed most to its alienation from the ecclesiastical establishment,

⁴⁰ See Moshe Sluhovskiy, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ See K. Lindley, "The lay Catholics of England in the Reign of Charles I", in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 22 (1971): 220-21.

⁴² Serenus Cressy, *Sancta Sophia, or, Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation* (London, 1657), 160.

Augustine Baker is of considerable interest to those examining developments in English Catholic spirituality.

On the one hand, Baker can be seen as a highly idiosyncratic figure. It would not be misleading to characterize him as a maverick spiritual director, advocating an obscure and rather exclusive method of contemplation (in prose which can be prolix and repetitious), and engaged in internecine disputes within his order; even within particular religious communities. As Bill Shiels has suggested, it would be a mistake to regard the spirituality of Baker or his followers as symptomatic of a general shift within English Catholicism towards a more irenic, introspective form of devotion.⁴³ On the other hand, Baker's legacy extended far beyond the manuscript remains he bequeathed to his community and his personal influence on individual sisters and brothers. His extensive work of translation and spiritual instruction, intended primarily for the edification of the Benedictine nuns at Cambrai, contributed to the formation of a mystical "canon", recovering medieval classics which became available in print for the first time as a result of his industry.⁴⁴ The controversies his ministry engendered within the Benedictine order also had wider implications: his apologists articulated a robust definition and defence of "mystique theologie", or "the mystique way of an internal life" as the purest and most abstracted spirituality, manifesting an acute awareness that this science of the interior was embattled in their own time.⁴⁵ The afterlife of Baker's writings as much as their contemporary significance contributed not only to the positive development of a separate discipline of mystical theology, but also provided the occasion, as I have shown elsewhere, for some of the most influential critiques of mystic divinity as enthusiasm in the Restoration period, and for the stigmatization of female visionaries as melancholics.⁴⁶

Baker voiced a profound disillusionment with compromised public institutions, and politicized religion in a climate of confessional conflict and raging polemic. His biographical peregrinations – which saw him pass in and out of successive phases in exile, in the cloister, in prayerful retirement, in scholarly endeavour and in missionary action – reflect his uneasy negotiation of the "inner" and the "outer" callings of his faith. Baker wrote of several conversions in his life, the most important of which was not necessarily his reconciliation to the Roman Church, but rather his incremental turning to the way of contemplation. According to his own account, his earliest religious crisis was brought about by a miracle high over the river Monnow, when his horse was turned around,

⁴³ William Shiels, "English Catholics at War and Peace" in Christopher Durston and Judith Maltby eds., *Religion in Revolutionary England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 151.

⁴⁴ See Elisabeth Dutton and Victoria Van Hying, "Augustine Baker and the Mystical Canon", in Geoffrey Scott ed., *Dom Augustine Baker (1575-1641)* (Leominster: Gracewing Publishing, 2012), pp. 85-110.

⁴⁵ Francis Gascoigne in John Clark ed., *Francis Gascoigne: An Apologie for myselfe about Fr. Baker's Doctrine; Abbesse Christina Brent: Discourse concerning Father Baker's Doctrine; Augustine Baker: Admittance; Bonilla; Ricerius* (Salzburg, 2011), p. 17. From Ampleforth Abbey MS 48, dated c.1653.

⁴⁶ Sarah Apetrei, "Between the rational and the mystical: the inner life and the early English Enlightenment", in Sara S. Poor and Nigel Smith eds., *Mysticism and Reform, 1400-1750* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 198-219.

delivering him from the perils of a collapsed footbridge. This was a turning from the nominal profession of religion to passionate zeal, rather than to a specific confessional position: he wrote in his autobiographical “Rythms” that he was brought “out of meer Atheism / Into True Catholicism ... For before my Conversion / I was of no Religion”.⁴⁷ He described his parents – who had been born into the essentially Catholic “Legall & Common Extern Religion of the Kingdome” under Henry VIII, and then married “in the Exercise of the Catholick Religion” – as “neutrals” under Elizabeth I, “neither indeed true Catholicks, for perfect knowledg, Belief & practice, nor yet meer protestants or otherwise Hereticks in their Belief”.⁴⁸ Although he reports that his father was somewhat inclined to piety, Baker was clearly later repelled by this secular complacency, this pragmatic neutrality in religion, and it was from this tepidity that he claimed to have converted. He seems also to have become disgusted by the strategies of Protestant apologists and biblical scholars, who learned Hebrew only in order to “Exult & Triumph ... over the Catholicks”.⁴⁹ Tellingly, one of Baker’s biographers, his close companion Leander Prichard, remarked that the only thing he loved about the Protestant faith was the “Singing of psalms ... he thought it was the most taking thing, that the protestants practised to get people together, and keep them in the Church”. The experiential high of congregational singing was much more effective than the “Hearing of Sermons”.⁵⁰

The most illuminating analysis of the effects of the Protestant schism in producing atheism comes in Prichard’s account, where he describes the “Chief Marke or Sign of Protestancy” as “Going to Church”: in other words, outward conformity.⁵¹ The things which “Averted [Baker] from Protestant Religion” included the secular motives which seemed to lie behind the schism:

1st, the Manner of Introducing it into the Christian World. Apostate Priests & Friers preaching and setting it forth out of a Wanton Libertinism. Princes and States Embracing it, out of a Greedy Desire, to be Possessed of the spoils of the Church, and the people out of an Innate Hatred to the Clergy. 2. It was so tepidly practised, and God so coldly Worshipped in it, that he Conceived, surely it was not a thing of Great worth, even in the Estimation of those who professed it. For there was not

⁴⁷ Augustine Baker, “Rythms”, in “*Quadrilogus, or, A Collection of Four Treatises Concerning the Life & Writings of the Venerable Father Augustin Baker*”, Bibliothèque Mazarine MS 1755, fol. 4r.

⁴⁸ “The Treatise of the Ven: Fa: August: Baker Concerning his Own Life” in “*Quadrilogus*”, fols. 14r-15r. Baker’s associate, Leander Prichard, claimed instead that the Baker parents were those “whom the Protestants call Church-Papists, that is, Men, who did Believe Catholicke Religion in their Hearts, but did outwardly practise the Protestant, For Fear or Interest”. In “The Second Treatise Concerning the Life and Writings of the Venerable Father, Fa: Augustin Baker” in *ibid.*, fol. 74r.

⁴⁹ “Treatise of the Ven: Fa: August: Baker”, fol. 33v.

⁵⁰ “The Second Treatise”, fols. 59r-v.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 73v.

yet Risen among us, or at least they were not so Common, Those Zealots, which we now Call Puritans.⁵²

Disenchantment with this external show of religion coincided with falling “out of Love wth Erasmus, as a Derider of all Religions, and Consequently, a Leader into Atheism”.⁵³ This assessment of Protestantism as an essentially secular movement, and a high road to atheism, also shaped Baker’s response to the worldly disputations in which some Catholics became embroiled. True conversion could not be the fruit of the bloodless speculation which characterized Protestant theology. He was of the opinion that “More are Converted to Catholick Religion, by Reading of Catholick Books, then by the Disputs of Learned Men”.⁵⁴ Serenus Cressy’s late seventeenth-century life of Baker speaks of his alienation from theological disputation as a prelude to his break with the Church of England, and of two conversions: the first “from error & schism to Catholic Unity & afterwards to a state of Religion & Contemplation”.⁵⁵ Throughout his career, Baker evinced much less concern about the conversion of England and the correction of heresy than he did about interior reform. His spiritual direction did not extend to informing the nuns about the theological errors of Protestantism. He recommended the mystical writings of the Flemish Benedictine Louis de Blois to the sisters at Cambrai, but warned them that the same author’s attacks on Reformation heresy were “not for y^r use”.⁵⁶

While still in England, Baker had become a chaplain at the Devonshire home of Philip Fursden in May 1620.⁵⁷ There, in what Baker’s biographers seem to have considered an exemplary or illustrative episode, he was instrumental in the conversion of Fursden’s mother-in-law, “a devout and zealous Protestant”. It is an illuminating episode when it comes to analysing Baker’s attitude to confessional controversy. This lady had stoutly resisted the efforts of several other missionary priests to persuade her by argument: “[b]ut she observed that Father Baker, unlike his brethren, made no apparent efforts to make her a Catholic.” When she quizzed him on this oversight, he replied that “he anticipated no good from disputation and therefore abstained from it, but that he truly desired her conversion and daily prayed for it”. He suggested that, as well as hearing the arguments on both sides, she should “join your prayers also, but prayers not according to the fashion of your church, but such as are made with pure submission of mind and indifference, flowing from a soul free from all worldly interests or designs”. Rather than submit to others’ judgments in a matter of eternal significance, she should go directly to the author of her salvation:

⁵² Ibid., fols. 75r-v.

⁵³ Ibid., fols. 74v-75r.

⁵⁴ “The Second Treatise”, fol. 75v.

⁵⁵ “The Life of the Ven. Augustine Baker of the Holy Order of St Bennet”, Downside Abbey Baker MS 44, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Augustine Baker, *Directions for Contemplation: Book H*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Analecta Cartusiana, 2000), 82.

⁵⁷ See David Lunn, *The English Benedictines, 1540-1688: From Reformation to Revolution* (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), 205.

for, “the only true master and teacher of prayer is God”.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Cressy expanded on Baker’s method of conversion:

His opinion indeed was that next to prayer the most probable means of finding the truth was reading with indifference, & so as to give liberty to the Divine Spirit to operate afterwards. As for disputing he made not so much account of it, by reason that it is apt to raise in men’s minds passions, desire of victory, unless the disputant’s heart were by a serious conversion first prepared for divine truth; although he knew one having been converted by occasion of a better reprehension that a good Catholic priest gave him in that he being a vain young man should dare to censure & contemn the Fathers & Counsels of the Church and said by another Catholic gentleman merily to have been scolded into the Church.⁵⁹

These reports of Baker’s preference for prayer over persuasion are reflected in his own account of his spiritual progress, which he emphasises was “masterless, yet not without a master” – he had taken “the spirit of God for his interior director”.⁶⁰

Baker’s personal dedication to the inner life of holiness over outward acts and theological argumentation must be viewed at least in part against the backdrop of conflict between the English Benedictines and the Jesuits. His rhetoric against disputation as a strategy for conversion was certainly linked to his hostility towards Jesuit (and, for that matter, Benedictine) activism in the mission field. Contemplation is presented not merely as a supplement but as a rival to Counter-Reformation mission. Stefania Tutino describes the outlook of the revived Benedictine order as characterized by “the absolute negation of any link between Catholicism and sedition, a committed anti-Jesuitism, a Gallican-flavored insistence on the need of distinguishing the pope from the church.”⁶¹ Polemic and disputation were jesuitical activities: the great theological antagonist of English Protestants, Cardinal Bellarmine, was of course a Jesuit. Against this view, a recent study of Baker has argued that “Baker’s project has more to do with the reconnection of English monastic spirituality with the European Catholic mainstream ... than it has to do with a clash between Benedictine and Jesuit spiritualities, or a revival of the pre-Reformation English mystical tradition.”⁶² The mystic authors that formed his “canon” included English but also European authors: he held up as authorities Dionysius, Herp, Suso and Tauler; among contemporaries, he was deeply impressed by Louis de Blois, and the Carthusians Johannes Justus von Lansperg and Constantin de Barbanson, as well as his fellow countryman, the Capuchin friar Benet Fitch. Rather, Baker was

⁵⁸ “The Life of the Ven. Augustine Baker”, 93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶¹ Stefania Tutino, *Law and Conscience: Catholicism in Early Modern England, 1570-1625* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 80.

⁶² John Douglas Barrett, “‘Such a World of Books’: Spiritual Reading in the Cambrai Treatises of Fr. Augustine Baker OSB”, University of London, Heythrop College unpub. PhD thesis (2011), 107.

keen to dispel the parochialism and polemical insularity of English Counter-Reformation discourse and to engage British Catholics in a wider spiritual renewal. Baker was caught up in much wider developments at the heart of the Catholic Reformation over the status of mystical theology; as much as he was in local antagonisms between rival orders.

A major controversy among the nuns at Cambrai, involving Baker and another confessor, Father Francis Hull, hinged on the question of authority. Baker accused Francis Hull of preaching excessively long sermons containing “austere and terrible Doctrin” about judgement, which put the ladies of the house into such a fright that “it hindered their sleepe, and much distempered their bodies, and indisposed the same for the time for the functions belonging to them”.⁶³ Not only this, but he brought in a puritanical and authoritarian “spirituallitie” which was not “according to the spirit of this house”: a controlling, “monarchicall Authoritie and government”.⁶⁴ Most of the objections which Hull brought against Baker had to do with clerical authority and confession. He complained that Baker had introduced an antinomian spirit, providing the nuns with “interpretations and Expositions uppon the Rule, Constitutions, Ordinances of visits, and Comands of Superiors, unknown and unapproved by Superiors; whereby he geveth them too much Libertie, and maketh them neglect, carelessly or wilfullie transgresse, or disesteeme the Rule, Statutes, ordinances and commands, as not binding ... as being rather burthens, then helps, to perfection”.⁶⁵ He protested against the doctrine that contemplatives were not bound to open their conscience to the Abbess or other superior; against the practice of infrequent confession; against unspecified manuscript books by Baker which tended towards the “destroieing [of] Obedience and the Authoritie of Superiors”. The last and summary objection held that “the Authoritie due to Priests, Confessariis, and Superiors is by Father Bakers Doctrin diminished, and more geven to women.”⁶⁶ Peter Salvin, Baker’s friend and biographer, summarized the accusations thus:

That he Taught too much Liberty of Spirit, and so Inclined to puritanism, slighted Obedience, & Regular Observances; that Those who pretended to follow his Way, Bandy against Superiors, Breed factions in the Congregation, and the like. Arguing just as Hereticks do, against Catholics: Reproaching us, that we are superstitious, Idolatrous, Tyrannicall, Bloud suckers &c.⁶⁷

Significantly, Baker’s opponents perceived that his teaching was indistinguishable from Protestant iconoclasm, undermining Catholic worship and discipline as superstition and tyranny. It could easily

⁶³ “A Letter to the V. R. Fa: President”, in Bodl. MS Rawl. C.460, pp. 48, 58, 66, 71-72.

⁶⁴ “A Letter” and “An Answer to Fa: Francis Hull his Obiections” in *ibid.*, 118, 249.

⁶⁵ “An Answer”, 286.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 295, 310-11, 349, 502.

⁶⁷ “Ye Fourth Treatise Written by ye V R Father Fa: Peeter Salvin A Disciple & intimate friend of ye venerable fathers”, in “Quadrilogus”, fol. 228r.

be a Protestant spiritualist arguing that to take the place of the Holy Spirit as a priest in offering direction is to “Take his Office from Him ... we take away The True & Lively Spirit and Teaching of God, and Obtrude & Thrust upon them, our own Dead Fancies & Conceits”.⁶⁸

Conclusions

It is not difficult to see why mysticism provided apologetic resources for Catholic reformers in an age of actual religious violence, as well as pamphlet wars. Western Christendom was disintegrating, and mystical writings offered a pacific, unitive spiritual language, as well as the impression of universality and detachment from secular entanglements. Mysticism transcended controversies and the particularities of local situations. Claiming this tradition for Catholicism was another means to show how Protestantism, like all heresy, was human, timebound, a contextually specific religious expression. The irony, of course, was that mysticism did indeed have a way of transcending specificity, in the sense that its appeal complicated institutional identities and crossed confessional boundaries. Some of the most radical anti-formalist Protestants in the context of the English civil wars in the 1640s were avid readers of mystical texts in a similar tradition to that which inspired Augustine Baker: Pseudo-Dionysius, Tauler, Benet of Canfield (or Benet Fitch). The proximity of mystics to illuminism, and heterodoxy on external observances, was not only a perception. Certain Quakers read widely in mystical theology, and found particularly deep sympathy with Baker himself.⁶⁹ The radicals found in the mystical “negative way” an inspiration to seek liberty of conscience and abandon institutional forms altogether, as corrupted by worldly power, or else meaningless. Baker himself took steps in an anti-authoritarian direction, and worried about the priest’s usurpation of the Holy Spirit in the inner life. It may also be possible to see in the canon-building enterprise and rhetoric around mystical writings in Baker’s circle, but also the Quaker apologists, an incipient conception of neoplatonic mysticism as a “perennial philosophy” transcending religious difference.

⁶⁸ Ibid., fols. 241r-v.

⁶⁹ George Keith, *Divine Immediate Revelation and Inspiration, continued in the true church. Second part* (London, 1685), 45-46.

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