

*Articoli/8*

# *Ecstasy in Classic Christian Mysticism*

Bernard McGinn  0000-0003-0952-4372

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Ecstasy (literally, ‘standing outside’), that is, the sense of being outside or beyond the ordinary modes of consciousness, seems to be a universal trait of human existence. Among the many forms of ecstasy is religious, or ‘supra-normal’, ecstasy, which is seen as coming from the action of a higher source, or divinity. This essay examines the forms of religious ecstasy and related terminology in classic Christian mysticism, beginning with the biblical witness and proceeding to the end of the seventeenth century. Three periods are investigated in some detail: (1) the Early Middle Ages (ca. 600-1200), especially the twelfth century; (2) the later Middle Ages (1200-1500); and (3) Early Modern Mysticism (1500-1700), with special attention to Teresa of Avila. While ecstasy is not the essence of Christian mysticism, it has been a major component of mysticism over many centuries.

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## **1. Introduction**

Ecstasy, from the Greek ‘standing outside’ (*ekstasis*), or ‘being separated’, seems to be a characteristic of human beings as conscious subjects, so widespread has it been across ages and cultures. The basic awareness that people have of their direct acts, as well as the self-reflection that they can have of these acts, implies the possibility of realizing that at certain times and states, people may perceive that they are ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’, themselves, separated from the ordinary modes of awareness and existing in some mode of altered consciousness<sup>1</sup>. Not all humans need to have experienced ecstasy in order to claim that it is a universal trait of human existence.

There are many human experiences that have been described as ecstatic – the term is amorphous. It may be helpful to distinguish three main types: (1)

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful overview is the multi-author article, *Extase*, in M. Viller et al. (eds.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, Tome IV. Paris 1961, cols. 2045-2189 (hereafter abbreviated *DS*).

a natural or common ecstasy found in intense fixation on various values and practices, including sexual activity; (2) forms of abnormal ecstasy that reflect physical or psychological illness; and finally (3) 'supra-normal' ecstasy that is experienced as coming from a superior cause, or divinity<sup>2</sup>. The physiological and psychological marks of ecstasy seem to be relatively common across all three kinds. These involve: (1) radical changes in sense perception, even up to cessation or alienation; (2) other physical changes, such as inhibition of movement, respiration, slowing of the heart, etc.; (3) suspension of the higher intellectual powers; and (4) loss of empirical consciousness. Ecstatic states can come from self-induced practices (mental and physical), from the use of substances that alter ordinary consciousness, and finally from the intervention of supra-human forces, at least as claimed by many religious traditions.

Any attempt to give a brief presentation of phenomenon of ecstasy faces major difficulties, although a great deal of literature exists on the subject. In what follows I will investigate only one important tradition of religious ecstasy – its development in classic Christian mysticism. Even with regard to this segment of the story there are significant issues regarding the content and limits of the inquiry. First of all, I do not claim that ecstasy is *the* essential characteristic of mysticism, despite some authorities who seem to have treated it as such<sup>3</sup>. Second, we need to note that religious ecstasy is closely related to, often even intertwined, with other important categories in religious studies. Four of these are immediately evident: ascent; contemplation; prophecy; and vision. The ascent of the soul to heaven is a key motif in many ancient religions, in Judaism, and in Christianity. In many narratives of ascent the rising soul is portrayed as being in a state of ecstasy. So, ascent is often accompanied by ecstasy, but by no means always, and not all ecstasies involve the soul's ascent. Contemplation is another broad category embracing many types and forms<sup>4</sup>. In Christianity, ecstasy has sometimes been identified with the highest form of God-given contemplation, but the two are not really the same, because many mystics teach that the height of contemplation (often termed 'mystical marriage') is not ecstatic. Similarly, the phenomenon of prophecy may involve the seer's passing into an ecstatic state to serve as the spokesperson of the divinity, but not always. Finally, visions in the sense of seeing supernal or divine things beyond ordinary realities may involve a seeing outside the usual states of consciousness, but not necessarily. Hence, while discussions of visions are often intermingled with treatments of ecstasy, the two concepts need to be distinguished. In the following pages my focus will be on ecstasy, although accounts of ecstasy often involve ascensions, acts of contemplation, visions, and sometimes even prophecy.

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<sup>2</sup> On these three forms, see Henri Gratton, *Extase. C.I. Psychologie et Extase*, in *DS* IV, cols. 2171-82.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Buber, *Ecstatic Mysticism. The Heart of Mysticism*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr, Cambridge 1985.

<sup>4</sup> The most detailed study is the multi-author article, *Contemplation*, in *DS*, Tome II, Paris 1953, cols. 1643-2193.

The term 'ecstasy' is part of a field of related terms. In Christian history this is where the influence of the Bible has had particular relevance. The Greek *ekstasis* does not appear in Classical Latin, but was taken over into Christian Latin (*ecstasis/extasis*) during the second and third centuries C.E., because it was used both in the LXX (e.g., *Gen.* 2:21) and the Greek New Testament (e.g., *Acts* 10:10, 22:17) to describe altered states of consciousness. In three Psalms (*Pss.* 30:23, 67:28, and 115:11) the LXX *ekstasis* is rendered in the Vulgate as *excessus mentis* (literally, a 'going out', or 'departure', of the mind). This is also the case with two other appearances of *ekstasis* (*Acts* 10:10 and 11:5) taken over by the Vulgate. *Acts* 11:5 is especially important because in it Peter, reporting his vision at Joppa, says: «I saw a vision in ecstasy» (*vidi in excessu mentis visionem*), thus bringing ecstatic states and supernatural visions together. *Ecstasis* and *excessus mentis* are synonyms in Christian mysticism, although some mystics sought to distinguish them.

The verb *rapiro*, 'to be borne or carried away', is used frequently by the Vulgate in many ways. Sometimes it appears in the sense of being carried away from one's normal condition by God. *Wisdom* 4:11 speaks of the just man as being 'taken away' (*raptus est*) in death lest wickedness alter his understanding. In the New Testament being 'raptured' applies both to being taken away in death (1 *Thess.* 4:16) and to being snatched away by God without dying (*Acts* 8:39; *Apoc.* 12:5). The most important use is in 2 *Corinthians* 12:2-4 where Paul speaks of himself as «being rapt to the third heaven» (*raptum...ad tertium caelum*), and «rapt to paradise» (*raptus est in paradisum*). Therefore both Peter and Paul are portrayed as ecstatics in the New Testament. Rapture is another synonym for ecstasy, although once again some later theologians tried to distinguish between the two. In the Romance languages most of the terms for ecstasy and rapture reflect these Latin roots, but in Germanic languages, like German, Dutch, and English, a whole range of equivalent terms for ecstatic states were created from native roots (e. g., 'drawn out, or away', 'sinking away', 'fading away', etc.).

Three further terms often used in relation to ecstasy need to be noted: mystical sleep (*somnium mysticum*); mystical death (*mors mystica*); and the oxymoron, sober intoxication (*sobria ebrietas*). Mystical sleep has biblical roots.<sup>5</sup> Most translations of *Genesis* 2:21 have God putting Adam to sleep so that Eve can be born from his rib, but the LXX and the Old Latin versions describe God as giving Adam an 'ecstasy'. Mystical sleep of the soul in love with God, however, mostly looks to the Song of Songs. In this text the human bride is several times described as asleep with her divine Lover, especially in the enigmatic text, «I sleep but my heart wakes» (*Sg.* 5:2). Spiritual, or mystical, sleep is a rather broad category and was often seen as a stage on the road to full ecstasy. In the second place we have death. Death is, of course, the ultimate *excessus*, or passing beyond, but death can also be conceived of as a temporary cessation of ordinary

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<sup>5</sup> P. Adnès, *Sommeil Spirituel*, in *DS*, Tome XIV, Paris 1989, cols. 1041-53.

conscious activity in order to be rapt up into God, what was often called *mors mystica*, another strong tradition both in Judaism and Christianity<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, there is 'mystical, or sober, inebriation'. Drunkenness is a form of natural *ek-stasis*, so what wonder that mystics came to use it as an analogy for being removed from ordinary consciousness in order to attain a new level of perceiving, knowing, and loving God? The first appearance of the term (Gr.: *methê nêphalios*) is in the Jewish philosopher-mystic, Philo of Alexandria (ca. 40 C.E.), who used it in several of his treatises. 'Sober intoxication' was to have a long history<sup>7</sup>. In Christianity, sober intoxication is mostly seen as a preparation for complete ecstasy. Nevertheless, these terms were often used as more-or-less equivalents. A passage from the Cistercian mystic, Gilbert of Hoyland (d. 1172), commenting on the Song of Songs, illustrates this. Referring to Song of Songs 5:2, he says: «Love unites and intoxicates.... The power of love is truly strong, intoxicating and alienating. My heart keeps watch more freely when it pursues this intoxication and drinks this wine. What a marvel! From inebriation comes sleep and from sleep comes vigilance. A good sleep (*somnium*) is a going beyond the mind (*excessus mentis*), a separation (*alienatio*) both from the affections of the flesh and the senses of the body...»<sup>8</sup>.

My emphasis on the Biblical roots of Christian understandings of ecstatic mysticism is not meant to deny the role that *ekstasis* had in Greek religious traditions, such as Pythagoreanism and Orphism, and especially in Greek philosophy, where the thought of Plato and the Platonic tradition on ecstasy has long been the object of study. There are certainly connections between Philo and later Plotinus on the way the Christian Fathers understood ecstatic states. One essay, however, can scarcely address the whole background to Christian views of ecstasy. It is clear that the Biblical witness, both in the narrow terminological sense noted above, as well as the broader sense of scriptural figures (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Benjamin, Moses, David, Elijah, Ezekiel, the Bride of the Song of Songs) who were seen as taken outside their normal consciousness by divine action had the predominate influence on what was to come.

Here I will concentrate on the Medieval and Early Modern periods, but since these built on the Patristic past, something needs to be said about this foundational layer. With the exegesis of the Bible as a guide, Christian teachers carved out a role for ecstasy as a significant aspect of the spiritual life. This can be seen in a number of exegetes, like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius in the East, and Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great in the West. Origen (d. 254) was opposed to pagan ecstatic oracles (*Contra Celsum* 7.3-4), but

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Christian materials, A. M. Haas, *Mort Mystique*, in *DS*, Tome X, Paris 1980, cols. 1777-90. The Jewish traditions have been studied by M. Fishbane, *The Death of God. Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism*, Seattle and London 1994.

<sup>7</sup> See the multi-author article, *Ivresse Spirituelle*, in *DS*, Tome VII, Paris 1971, cols. 2312-37. The early stages of the history have been studied by H. Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Antike Mystik*, Giessen 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert of Hoyland, *Sermones super Cantica*, 42.1 (*Patrologia Latina* [hereafter *PL*] 184, col. 220B). Gilbert refers to *sobria ebrietas* about a dozen times in his writings.

praised Christian ecstasy and 'sober intoxication' in his writings, especially in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 397), deeply influenced by Philo and Platonic philosophers, also made use of *ekstasis*, especially in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 10-11. The Dionysian Corpus is collection of four treatises and ten letters purportedly written by Paul's convert, Dionysius of the Areopagus (*Acts* 17:34), but actually produced by an anonymous monk of Syria in the late fifth century CE. Dionysius adds a new dimension to Christian theology of ecstasy by expanding the notion to include a loving ecstasy of God towards his creation (*Divine Names* 4).

The Latin Fathers also witness to the role of *ekstasis* and *sobria ebrietas*. Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) shows a melding of both Biblical and Platonic strains on the nature of ecstasy, especially in his *On Isaac or the Soul* and his treatise *On the Good of Death*. Ambrose's former catechumen, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), employed ecstasy and related terms across his writings. Sometimes Augustine speaks of his own ecstatic states (e.g., *Confessions* 7.10 and 17, 9.10, and 10.40), while at other times he exegetes biblical passages, especially from the Psalms, on rapture<sup>9</sup>. Of particular importance is his discussion of the three kinds of vision found in Book 12 of the *Literal Commentary on Genesis*. Here Augustine approaches the problem of how to understand Paul's rapture in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 by way of a distinction of three kinds of visions: corporeal; spiritual (i.e., imaginative); and intellectual, or purely mental (*De Gen. ad litt.*, 12.6.15-7.16, and 12.24.51). Sometimes the two higher forms of seeing involve *ekstasis*, which the bishop defines as «when...the soul's intention is completely turned away or snatched away from the body's senses» (12.12.25; see also 12.26.53). Do intellectual ecstatic visions allow for the direct perception of God (*visio beatifica*) in this life? Using the biblical examples of Moses and Paul, Augustine seems to have thought so, although later authorities had trouble with this. Gregory the Great (d. 604) presents a mystical teaching revolving around two poles: *compunctio* and *contemplatio*. *Compunctio*, or being 'pierced' by God (*Acts* 2:37), at times has an ecstatic note. *Contemplatio*, viewed generically as 'attentive regard for God', involves both joy and fear, joy in catching ecstatic glimpses of God and the awe that beats the soul back down in consciousness of its sinfulness.

## 2. The Early Middle Ages

The period ca. 600-1100 made little original contribution to the theology of ecstasy. In the twelfth century, however, an explosion of discussions of ecstasy becomes evident. Most of these look back to the Bible and the Patristic past, but they also feature new forms of witness to the experience of being rapt into God. Individual mystics of the period sometimes talked about their ecstatic states,

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<sup>9</sup> According to the *Thesaurus Augustinus*, *ekstasis* is used eighty-seven times by Augustine, while *excessus mentis* appears twenty-four times.

but the most important treatments are found in the Cistercian mystics and in Richard of Saint-Victor<sup>10</sup>.

Like the Patristic authors, the Cistercians tended to talk about ecstasy objectively on the basis of the Bible. But with some, especially Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), autobiographical notices slip in with the abbot who told his monks, «Today we read in the book of experience» (*Hodie legimus in libro experientiae*; in *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 3.1; hereafter SC).<sup>11</sup> Bernard has a rich teaching on ecstasy<sup>12</sup>. The Cistercian based his teaching on his own experience, as can be seen in a passage from SC 74. Although Bernard does not use the language of *excessus mentis* or *raptus* here, he refers to Paul's rapture in 2 Corinthians and therefore sees it as comparable. Commenting on the Bride's request to the Bridegroom to 'Return' (Sg. 2:17), he says: «Now bear with my foolishness a little while (2 Cor. 11:1). I want to tell you as I promised about my own experience of this sort of thing... I admit that the Word has also come to me, and – I speak foolishly (2 Cor. 11:17) – come often. As often as he has come to me, I have not perceived the different times of his coming. I perceived that he has been present; I remembered that he had been there»<sup>13</sup>.

Bernard has a wide range of vocabulary for such experiences. In describing contemplation he often used the terms *quies/otium* (quiet/rest; e.g., SC 18.6), which have some overlap with ecstasy. Bernard frequently speaks of *raptus* and being 'raptured' (*rapitur*)<sup>14</sup>, and he uses *excessus mentis* more often than *extasis*<sup>15</sup>. The appearance of wine in the Song of Songs allows him to make use of the notion of *sobria vel sacra ebrietas* (e.g., SC 7.3, 18.5, 49.1-4, 76.2), and we also find references to spiritual sleep, again in relation to the Bride of the Song. For Bernard ecstasy is both cognitive and affective, and he may be among the first to distinguish two kinds: «Holy contemplation has two forms of ecstasy, one in the intellect, the other in the will; one of enlightenment, the other of fervor; one of knowledge, the other of devotion...» (SC 49.4; *Opera* 2:75; see also SC 57.8). Contemplation is ecstasy, as Bernard says in several places. An important discussion is in SC 52, where the abbot comments on the sleep of the Bride in the arms of the Bridegroom (Sg. 2:6-7). He says: «It is truly a sleep that does not dull the interior sense but leads it away. It is also a death». He calls this *extasis* a death, because it takes the soul away from life's cares and enables it «to be snatched from itself by a holy and vehement thought...so that it surpasses the common use and custom of thinking». The Bride has no sensation of living,

<sup>10</sup> For the medieval period, B. Faes de Mettoni, *Figure e motivi della contemplazione nelle teologie medievali*, Florence 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard's works are in J. Leclercq et al. (eds.), *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 9 vols., Rome 1957-77.

<sup>12</sup> Ecstasy is an aspect of Bernard's teaching on love, on which see M. Casey, *Athirst for God. Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard, SC 74.5 (*Opera* 2:242). For another ecstatic account reflecting personal experience, see SC 41.3 (*Opera* 2:30).

<sup>14</sup> Among the most detailed discussions of rapture is the treatment of Paul's *raptus* in *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* 8.22-23 (*Opera* 3:33-35).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., in the SC *excessus mentis* is found in SC 7.6, 31.6, 33.7, 38.3, 41.3, 49.4, 52.4-6, 54.8, 62.3-4, 67.5, and 85.13, while *extasis* is only found in SC 52.4.

though she is still alive. «This kind of passing beyond (*excessus*)», he continues, «either alone, or principally, is called contemplation». It is an experience of true rest (*quies*), where «the soul overcome by the beauty of the spot, sleeps sweetly in her Beloved's embrace, that is, in spiritual passing away (*in spiritu excedisse*)»<sup>16</sup>. Another key text on ecstasy is from SC 85, where Bernard speaks of two ways of giving birth in spiritual marriage – bearing souls by preaching and bearing spiritual understandings in prayer. «In the last kind», he says, «sometimes there is a passing beyond and a departing (*exceditur et seceditur*) even from the corporeal senses so that she who perceives the Word does not perceive herself. This happens when the mind, attracted by the Word's ineffable sweetness, is as it were stolen away from itself – indeed, rapt and snatched from itself (*rapitur et elabitur*) – in order to enjoy the Word»<sup>17</sup>.

Bernard's contemporaries among the Cistercians also gave attention to ecstatic states. William of St.-Thierry (d. 1147) mentions ecstasy in several places in his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*. For William, union with God (*unitas spiritus* of 1 Cor. 6:17) is nothing else than the embrace of the Holy Spirit, that is, having the love that is the Spirit living and loving within us. This involves a form of rapture, but William is at pains to contrast our brief and fleeting experiences of unitive ecstasy here below with the perfect ecstasy to come in heaven. In *Exposition* No. 128 he says: «The embrace is begun here to be made perfect there. «The one abyss calls out to the other» (Ps. 41:8). This ecstasy dreams of something far different from what it sees – the one secret sighs for the other, the one joy imagines the other, the one sweetness looks forward to the other»<sup>18</sup>. The slumber of the Bride (Sg. 2:6) involves ecstatic separation from the world: «The Bride asleep in the embrace of the Bridegroom is often hidden in the secret of his face from the disturbances of people; she is protected in her tabernacle from the clash of voices; and, with her mind now passing into God (*mente modo excedens Deo*), now also sober for her neighbor, she is always prepared to rest and to show herself according to the will of the One who hides and protects her»<sup>19</sup>. In his comments on the bride hearing the voice of the Bridegroom (Sg. 2:7-8) William says: «In her passing over or ecstasy (*in excessu suo seu exstasi*), in the sleep of quiet, the Bride, hearing the voice of the One who entreats her, that is, feeling the grace of Him who inspires her, and seeing the power of Him at work in her, and knowing that the young maidens respect her and still make spiritual progress, cries out, «The voice of my Beloved!» .... To me his beloved in my ecstasy of mind He reveals the hidden forests of his mysteries and sacraments» (*Exposition*, No. 136; ed., 96).

<sup>16</sup> SC 52.5-6 (*Opera* 2:93). See also Bernard's treatise *De diligendo Deo* 10.27 (*Opera* 3:142-43).

<sup>17</sup> SC 85.13 (*Opera* 2:315).

<sup>18</sup> *Expositio super Cantica Cantorum*, ed. P. Verdeyen, in *Guillelmi a Sancto Theodorico Opera Omnia, Pars II*, Turnhout 1997, No. 128 (pp. 91-92). For more on the brevity of *exstasis*, see No. 95 (p. 72).

<sup>19</sup> *Expositio* No. 133 (ed., 95). For some other uses of *exstasis/excessus*, see Nos. 35, 43, 113, and 143.

Most of the other Cistercians also speak of ecstasy, spiritual slumber, and sober intoxication. In his *Sermon 5*, for example, Isaac of Stella (d. ca. 1170) did not hesitate to compare spiritual ecstasy to the rapture experienced in sex, although he contrasts the two. The Cistercian continuators of Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs, such as Gilbert of Hoyland (cited above), and John of Ford (d. 1214), also had much to say on the topic. Nevertheless, the other major twelfth-century contribution to the theology of ecstasy comes from the Victorines, the canons who ran an important theological center at the Abbey of St. Victor just outside the walls of Paris.

Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1140) was the central figure of this School which combined monastic piety with the theology of the urban schools (Scholasticism). Hugh mentions ecstasy only rarely. There is more on the topic in the sermons of his younger contemporary, Achard of St. Victor (d. 1161). It was the major author of the second generation, Richard of St. Victor (d. 1172), who made the most important contribution. Richard can be described as the first great systematizer of ecstatic states, one whose views were widely cited in following centuries. He was also traditional in setting out his theory through a tropological (moral) and anagogical (ascending) reading of biblical texts. Although not written in a personal voice, Richard's treatises deal with both the practical and the theoretical aspects of the spiritual exercises that prepare the soul for experiencing God.

The treatise often called *Benjamin minor* (more correctly the *Twelve Patriarchs*) interprets the Genesis account of Jacob (= the intellectual soul), his marriages, and the twelve sons they produce as revealing how the various powers of *affectus* figured in Leah and of *ratio* figured in Rachel help prepare for the ecstatic contemplation represented by Rachel's final child, Benjamin (Ps. 67:28), whose birth in Genesis 35:18-19 marks her death (i.e., reason must cease when ecstasy takes over)<sup>20</sup>. The details of this complex spiritual reading are too complicated to set forth here, but the decisive part comes in the treatment of Benjamin in Chapters 71-87. This short treatise on ecstasy also makes use of the New Testament account of Jesus's Transfiguration (*Mt.* 17), thus introducing a Christological dimension into ecstasy. The intellectual soul, now polished by the practice of the virtues in its various powers, is ready for the gift of grace that produces ecstasy: «Benjamin is born and Rachel dies, because when the human mind is rapt above itself all the limits of human reasoning are surpassed. Every form of human reason succumbs to what it beholds of the divine light when it is lifted above itself and rapt in ecstasy» (Chap. 73; col. 52D). Despite some use of erotic language (Chap. 85), Richard is primarily interested in ecstatic contemplation as 'pure understanding', which he divides into two forms: «contemplation above but not beyond reason», and «contemplation above and beyond reason», which provides an existential cognition of «things that seem to contradict all reason», such as the Trinity (Chap. 86).

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<sup>20</sup> For the *Benjamin minor* I will use the edition in *PL* 196, cols. 1-64. There is a translation by G. A. Zinn, *Richard of St. Victor. The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity*, New York 1979, 51-147.

Richard returned to ecstatic contemplation in greater detail in *Benjamin maior*, more correctly called the *Mystical Ark*, because it is based on a mystical reading of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25). This is among the most detailed analyses of *extasis* in Christian mysticism<sup>21</sup>. The *Mystical Ark* sets out six ascending forms of contemplation, defined generally as «the free penetration (*perspicacia*) of the mind, hovering in wonder, into the manifestations of Wisdom» (Bk. 1.4). The six kinds of contemplation are based on the soul's three essential levels of knowing: imagination; reason; and understanding (*intelligentia*), with each power doubled in relation to the kinds of objects it considers<sup>22</sup>. Book 1 is an introduction, while Books 2-4 consider the six levels in detail. *Excessus mentis* and *alienatio mentis* are proper to levels five and six, but can also occur on the lower levels (Bk. 4.22), so Richard obviously thinks of these terms as analogical. Book 5 is devoted to the personal meaning of the ecstasy of the two highest forms of contemplation. In his initial discussion of these forms of *excessus mentis* in Book 4.11-13 Richard once again turned to Old Testament figures, such as Abraham, Elijah, and the Bride of the Song, to illustrate his teaching. Book 5 expands on these and other Old Testament types to construct a map of forms of ecstasy. Contemplative ecstasy, according to Richard, comes in three modes: enlarging the mind (*dilatatio mentis*; Bk. 5.3); elevating the mind (*elevatio mentis*; Bk. 5.4); and alienation of mind (*alienatio mentis*; Bk. 5.5). Alienation of mind, which arises from the 'flame of inner love' (note the affective aspect), is ecstasy in the most proper sense. It comes in three forms that Richard describes on the basis of Old Testament figures. «Greatness of devotion» (*magnitudo devotionis*) is figured in Abraham (Bk. 5.6-8), while «greatness of wonder» (*magnitudo admirationis*) is shown in both the Queen of Sheba and in the Apostle Peter (Bk. 5.9-13). The last form is «greatness of exultation» (*magnitudo exultationis*) as found in the Bride of the Song (Bk. 5.14-19). Of this form Richard says: «The human mind is alienated from itself, when having drunk of the inner abundance of interior sweetness, indeed fully inebriated by it, the mind completely forgets what it is and what it has been and is carried away into an ecstasy of alienation by the excess of its dance and is suddenly transformed into a form of supra-mundane affect under the influence of a state of wondrous happiness» (Bk. 5.5; col. 174BC).

Richard of St. Victor made another important contribution to the theology of ecstasy in his treatise the *Four Degrees of Violent Charity*, an analysis of the wound of love motif (Sg. 2:5)<sup>23</sup>. In these four degrees it is stage three (*amor singularis*), representing mystical marriage, that features the language of rapture

<sup>21</sup> The *Benjamin maior* is in PL 196, cols. 63-202. For a translation, see G. A. Zinn, *Richard of St. Victor*, cit., 149-370.

<sup>22</sup> Imagination directed to sense things considers: (1) visible things, and (2) the ideas of visible things. Reason directed to intelligible realities considers: (3) the qualities of invisible things, and (4) spirits, angelic and human. Finally, understanding directed to 'intellectibles' considers: (5) the divine nature, and (6) the Trinity.

<sup>23</sup> G. Dumeige, *Yves: Épitre à Severin sur la charité. Richard de Saint-Victor. Le quatre degrés de la violent charité*, Paris 1955.

and ecstasy. But stage three must yield to the highest form of love in stage four, the *amor insatiabilis* of spiritual childbirth, in which the soul passes through the ecstasy of mystical death to be reborn with Christ and to continue his saving work in the world, giving birth to further spiritual offspring. Ecstasy is not the goal.

### 3. The Later Middle Ages (1200-1500)

The last three centuries of the Middle Ages feature many treatments of *exstasis* and related terms and themes. There is a shift to personal accounts, both by the mystics themselves, and also by hagiographers describing saintly ecstasies. Many of these subjects are women, but we should beware of characterizing late medieval ecstasy as just a female phenomenon. There were also many theological analyses of the nature of ecstasy. The preponderance of individual descriptions seems to have been an aspect of the shift in Western mysticism that became evident around 1200 that I have called the 'New Mysticism'<sup>24</sup>. The two major new forms of religious life connected with the 'New Mysticism', the Franciscans and the Beguines, both featured numerous ecstasies. Given the wealth of material, we cannot look at all these 'excessive' mystics, especially because there is often a good deal of repetition in the accounts.

Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) is illustrative of the turn to ecstasy. Francis's own sparse writings say nothing about such states, but the Francis of tradition, beginning from the earliest lives by Thomas of Celano, paint Francis as a visionary and ecstatic *par excellence*. Celano's *First Life* recounts a series of Francis's visions and ecstatic experiences, culminating in that of the reception of the stigmata. According to Celano, Francis's early transformative experience of 1208 had him «raptured above himself and absorbed in a certain light so that his interior mind was enlarged and he could clearly see what was to come» (1 Cel. 26). He also speaks of the saint as being «in frequent ecstasy» (1 Cel. 103), or as contemplating Christ «in rapture of mind» (1 Cel. 115). The later sources about *Il Poverello* exponentially increased such accounts. The most important witness is Bonaventure (d. 1274), the seventh Minister General of the Franciscans. In his *Mind's Journey into God* (1257) Bonaventure lays out a roadmap of seven stages of ascent to divine union. Francis is mentioned at the beginning and returns in the final stage of ecstatic passage into God, which Bonaventure describes as taking place through the contemplation of Christ on the cross, saying: «This was also shown to blessed Francis when he was enraptured with high contemplation on the mountain [his reception of the stigmata on Mt. Alverna].... There he passed over into God through contemplative rapture and was established as an example of perfect contemplation, just as he had previously been of action»<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> On the 'New Mysticism', B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, New York 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* 7.3. Bonaventure's *Major Life* of Francis (1261) often depicts the saint as an ecstatic; e.g., 1.5, 2.1, 3.6, 8.10, 9.2, 10.1-4, 11.3, and 12.1.

Ecstasy became a hallmark of Franciscan mysticism, as witnessed by Francis's early followers, such as Clare of Assisi (d. 1253) and Giles of Assisi (d. 1262). Giles enjoyed frequent raptures, as is evident in the hagiographical accounts that gathered around him. According to one story, the local boys would annoy him by shouting 'Paradiso, Paradiso!', for the fun of seeing him go off into ecstasy. Giles's *Sayings (Dicta)* contain a brief text setting out seven stages of special experiences of the spiritual senses, including ecstasy and rapturous contemplation, and concluding with the glory that gives immense joy. The original Franciscan ecstatic impetus continued during the next century and more, both in terms of personal witnesses and of theological analyses of *exstasis* and *raptus* by theologians of the Order. In terms of personal accounts, the Spiritual Franciscans, who insisted that they alone were adhering to the model of absolute poverty and asceticism proclaimed by the saint, were notable for their ecstatic manifestations<sup>26</sup>.

Marie of Oignies (d.1213) plays a similar role in the Beguine movement that Francis had for the mendicants. The Beguines were small groups of women who practiced a life of pious devotion and apostolic action without taking formal vows or becoming a recognized religious order. Marie herself wrote nothing, but her disciple, Jacques de Vitry, authored a *Life (Vita)* of this pioneering Beguine that portrayed her as a model of severe asceticism, service to the lepers and the poor, devotion to the Eucharist, and especially of ecstatic prayer. Marie's ecstasies are a good example of new 'excessive' forms of passing beyond the self, such as loud shouting, a wordless singing (*iubilus*), and catatonic raptures that lasted for considerable time, even days. (Previous ecstatic states seem to have mostly been of short duration.) Jacques notes a lengthy rapture triggered by receiving the Eucharist: «Once she rested sweetly with the Lord for thirty-five days in a sweet and blessed silence, taking no corporeal food and totally unable to speak a word for days save for, "I want the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ". ... Thus, she was drawn away from sensible objects and rapt above herself in an ecstasy (*excessus*). Finally, after five weeks she returned to herself, opened her mouth, and ... spoke and received corporeal food»<sup>27</sup>. Jacques also notes the at times violent nature of some of Marie's ecstasies, which increased in intensity as her life drew to a close. On her deathbed, «She began to sing in a high and clear voice and did not cease for three days and nights to praise the Lord with thanksgiving» (*Vita* 2.11.98;

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<sup>26</sup> These Spiritual ecstasies included both men and women. Among the women were Douceline de Digne (d. 1274), the reality of whose ecstatic trance was once tested by the cruel Charles of Anjou by having molten lead poured on her feet! The *Memorial* of Angela of Foligno (d. 1310) includes many raptures. Male mystics also featured frequent and lengthy ecstatic states, as we see in Roger of Provence (d. 1287), whose biographer claims he was raptured a hundred times during a single Matins!

<sup>27</sup> Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Beatae Mariae Oigniacensis (Acta Sanctorum, Junius 23, cols. 636-66)*. This passage is *Vita* 1.8.25 (col. 642DE). Jacques recounts at least a dozen other such experiences; see, *Vita* 1.5.16, 1.6.20, 1.7.22, 1.8.24, 2.2.48, 2.4.63, 2.7.81, 2.8.87-88, 2.8.90, 2.11.98-99, and 2.12.107.

col. 662F). Marie introduces a new chapter in the history of ecstasy in Christian mysticism, one that was to have many followers.

The evidence for the spread of ecstatic practices, both of the traditional and the new excessive nature, guaranteed that rapture and ecstasy remained a topic of late medieval theological discussion. Treatments are found among many Scholastics, but here I treat only two of the most influential: Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. Bonaventure's doctrine of ecstasy is found in two contexts: first, his spiritual treatises, such as the *Mind's Journey into God* and the *Collations on the Hexaemeron*; and second, his academic works, such as the *Commentary of the Sentences* and the *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*.

Bonaventure's view of ecstasy was influenced by his adoption of the interpretation of the Dionysian writings pioneered by Thomas Gallus (d. 1246), the initiator of what has been called 'Affective Dionysianism', that is, the view that the passing beyond all intellectual activity found in the Dionysian writings takes place through ecstatic love in what Gallus called the 'summit of affectivity' (*apex affectus*). In his commentaries on Dionysius Gallus interprets the nine choirs of angels of the Dionysian *Celestial Hierarchy* as indicating the soul's ascent to God. He thus distinguished two forms of brief ecstasy: an *excessus mentis* that involves *both* intellect and love (figured in the Thrones and Cherubim); and a higher *excessus* of love alone represented by the Seraphim<sup>28</sup>. In the *Mind's Journey*, as we have seen, Francis illustrates the ultimate form of the ecstasy found in the 'passing over' (*transitus*), when, «with all intellectual operations left behind, the apex of affectivity is totally transferred and transformed into God» (7.4). In the *Collations on the Hexaemeron*, the theology of history set out in his unfinished talks on the Genesis creation account, the Doctor expands the horizon by predicting the coming of a contemplative order that, like Francis, will practice a life of affective communal ecstasy (*Collations* 22.22-23). Although Bonaventure stresses the ecstasy of love, there is space left for a transformed knowledge in ecstatic contact with God, as he says in *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, q. 7: «Ecstasy (*excessus*) is the ultimate and most noble form of knowing (*cognitio*)». This knowing is incommunicable, a feeling of the mystery of the Trinity, 'a wisdom without form' (*sapientia nulliformis*), an imageless consciousness of divine love. This is the highest form of contact with God ordinarily found in this life, and Bonaventure argues it is open to all; but it remains inferior to the beatific vision. Bonaventure allowed that a few saints (Moses, Job, Paul, Dionysius, Francis) had been given the higher gift of rapture (*raptus*). The «vision of the understanding absorbed in God through rapture», he says, is an «uplifting [that] makes the soul as like to God as it can be in this life. Ecstasy and rapture are not the same». Those who have been given the latter gift, «do not have the habit of glory, but only an actuation of it»<sup>29</sup>, that is, they

<sup>28</sup> J. Barbet (ed.), *Thomas Gallus. Commentaires du Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris 1967, 141-42.

<sup>29</sup> *Collations on the Hexaemeron* 3.30. For other discussions of *exstasis* and *raptus*, see *Collations* 2.30-33; *Commentary on the Sentences* II, dist. 23, art. 2, q. 3, ad 6; III, dist. 35, art. 1, q. 1;

receive a foretaste of the glory of heaven. Later Franciscan handbooks of mystical theology were also to say a good deal about ecstasy and rapture<sup>30</sup>.

Thomas Aquinas discussed *extasis* and *raptus* both in the *Summa theologiae* (*STh*) and in his *Disputed Questions on Truth* (*De veritate*)<sup>31</sup>. Like Bonaventure, but in his own way, Thomas distinguishes between ecstasy, which indicates a general going beyond the self by being placed outside the proper order of nature, and rapture, which adds a note of force or violence<sup>32</sup>. The Dominican's basic point is that the human mind cannot see God in this life, but by miraculous exception God can abstract a person's mind from the senses to give it some brief glimpse of the divine essence here below. «Those to whom it is granted to see God essentially in this way are totally drawn from the action of the senses.... Hence they are said to be raptured, and by the power of the superior nature they are drawn away from what belongs to them by nature» (*De veritate*, q. 10, a. 11). This is true of Paul and Moses, but of very few others. In *STh*, q. 175, a. 2, Thomas discusses whether rapture belongs to the appetitive or the intellectual power and solves the question with a typical distinction. As regards its goal of seeing God, rapture belongs to the cognitive power, but with regard to its cause, rapture can pertain to the appetitive power, when «from the violence of the affection a person is carried away from everything else. It also has an effect on the appetitive power when someone delights in the things he is raptured to». However, in *STh*, IIaIIae, q. 28, a. 3, Thomas distinguished ecstasy of the cognitive power from ecstasy of the appetitive power, so we can say that for the Dominican there is both an ecstasy of knowledge, best seen in Paul (*In Ep. 2 ad Cor. 12*, lect. 1-2), and an ecstasy of love, as taught by Dionysius (*In Lib. De Div. Nom. 4*, lect. 10). Thomas also has a penetrating treatment of the effects of Paul's rapture on his memory and intellect<sup>33</sup>.

Ecstatic states, often prolonged, were a feature in the lives and writings of many of the 'holy women' (*mulieres religiosae*) of the later Middle Ages. Among the *Lives* (*Vitae*) of the Beguines there are a number of accounts of ecstasy (e.g., Christina of Stommeln, Margaret of Ypres, Agnes Blannbekin). The former Beguine and then Cistercian nun, Beatrice of Nazareth (d. 1260), is portrayed as an ecstatic in the anonymous *Life of Beatrice* (especially 4.36-49), while in her own Flemish text, *Seven Manners of Loving*, the fourth 'manner' involves a rapture of love and loss of consciousness. Two important Beguine writers have much to say on the topic of rapture. Hadewijch of Antwerp (d. ca. 1250) was the author of poems, letters, and visions. In her *Visions* she makes a number of

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and IV, dist. 6, art. 3, q. 2, dub. 1; *Breviloquium* V.6.8; *Sermo de Sabbato Sancto* 1.3; and the *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, q. 4, concl.

<sup>30</sup> Among these are David of Augsburg (d. 1272) and Rudolph of Biberach (d. ca. 1330).

<sup>31</sup> The major texts are *STh* IIaIIae, q. 175, aa. 1-6; and *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 11, and q. 13, aa. 1-5. Thomas's teaching on ecstasy fits within his wider doctrine on contemplation, on which see R. Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, Oxford 2021.

<sup>32</sup> In *STh*, q. 175, a. 3, ad 1, Thomas distinguishes three kinds of rapture.

<sup>33</sup> *STh* IIaIIae, q. 175, a. 4, ad 3; and *De veritate*, q. 13, a. 4, ad 4. Thomas's solution is very similar to Dante's discussion of his own rapture in *Paradiso* I.4-12, and XXXIII.52-64.

references to her ecstasies (e.g., *Visions* 7, and 13-14), but in her *Letters* written to other Beguines she cautions them against too much reliance on ecstatic states and spiritual sweetness (*Letters* 4.77-79, 6.210-14, 10.15-50, and 15.75.80). Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. ca. 1282) was another Beguine who ended her life as a Cistercian nun. Her varied revelations, visions, and poems, were taken down by Dominican friars and collected in six books under the title, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*FL*). Mechthild uses an unusual form of language for ecstasy. At the beginning of Book 1 of the *Flowing Light* she sets out a dialogue between the soul and personified Love (*frouwe minne*). In Chapter 2 the soul leaves the body in response to a 'divine greeting' (*gruos*), an invitation that draws her into a secret place where she plays a 'game of love' with God. «Then, she [i.e., Mechthild herself] soars further to a blissful place of which I neither will nor can speak». At the conclusion she says, «No one can or should receive this greeting unless one has gone beyond oneself and become nothing. In this greeting I want to die while living»<sup>34</sup>. Along with this language of ecstatic greeting, Mechthild employs a broad range of Middle High German terms for forms of ecstasy, such as, «drunkenness» (*übertrunken*, *FL* 2.3), *iubilus* (*FL* 4.23), «wondrous death» (*wunderliche tot*, *FL* 4.13; see also 1.3, 1.28, 3.23, etc.), as well as different forms of «drawing-out or away» (*zuge-ziehen*, *FL* 1.5, 4.8, 5.5, 5.28). Despite her use of the language of ecstasy, it is clear that Mechthild, like Hadewijch, did not consider rapture to be the goal of the mystical path; rather, she hoped that her readers, after undergoing painful experiences of dereliction and distancing from God (e.g., *FL* 4.12, 5.4), would attain to a peaceful state of being totally God-centered (see, e.g., *FL* 6.20). Many of the other religious women of the period also talk about their ecstasies, such as the Cistercian nuns of Helfta (ca. 1280-1300), and the German Dominican nuns of the fourteenth century (e.g., Margaret Ebner, Adelheid Langmann, and the nuns in the *Sister-Books*). These, and other raptured women, testify to how widespread ecstatic accounts were in the last centuries of the Middle Ages.

Meister Eckhart (d. 1328) was ambivalent towards ecstasy. He was generally suspicious of mystical gifts, such as visions, but he could scarcely deny the existence of ecstatic states, given their appearance in scripture and tradition. For Eckhart the essence of mystical consciousness of God is arrived at not through ecstasy, but by way of the inner emptying of detachment (*abgescheidenheit*) and releasement (*gelassenheit*) that allow for the birth of the Word in the soul and the 'breaking-through' (*durchbrechen*) into the Godhead. Still, ecstasy has a role to play, as long as it does not come to be seen as a 'way' to God. «Whoever is seeking God by ways», said Eckhart, «is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden» (German Sermon, hereafter Pr. 5b). In his sermon cycle on the 'Birth of the Word' (Pr. 101-04) Eckhart insists that the birthing can take place only by utter passivity within the silent ground of the soul. This inward

<sup>34</sup> H. Neumann (ed.), *Mechthild von Magdeburg. Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 2 vols., Munich 1990-93, *FL* 1.2 (8-9). For other appearances of the *gruos*, see *FL* 1.5, 1.14, 2.3, 4.2, 5.18, 6.1, and 6.39.

withdrawal can be described as ecstatic: «When all [soul's] powers are drawn away (*abgezogen*) from all their works and images, then the Word is spoken.... So, the more completely you are able to draw in (*geziehen*) your powers into one and forget all things you have drawn into (*gezügte*) yourself and the further you can get from creatures and their images, the nearer you are to this and the readier to receive it». He then cites the example of Paul's rapture in 2 Corinthians<sup>35</sup>. This text and some others show that Eckhart thought that a withdrawal from sense experience could play a part of the path to union with God, but that the soul should never fixate on such states or linger on their deceptive sweetness<sup>36</sup>.

If Eckhart took a guarded approach to ecstasy, this was not the case with his followers, such as Henry Suso and John Tauler, although neither of them identified ecstasy with the highest mystical state. Suso (d. 1366) was among the greatest ecstatic mystics of the Middle Ages. His semi-autobiographical *Life of the Servant* is filled with visions and accounts of ravishments<sup>37</sup>. Suso was notable not only for his personal witness, but also for his contributions to the vocabulary of ecstasy. In the *Life*, Chapter 48, he distinguishes three kinds of «withdrawing» (*vergangenheit*): complete ceasing to exist; temporary ecstasy, such as Paul enjoyed in 2 Corinthians 12; and «weak releasement», or imperfect withdrawal. «Withdrawal into the simple Godhead», does not mean the creature is changed into God, but in rapture (*entnomenheit*) the spirit withdraws, forgets itself, and sees all things as God. In his *Little Book of Truth*, Chapter 5, he repeats the same message: «Being powerfully transported from self into the Nothing [=God] eliminates all difference in the ground, not of essences but of how we perceive».

Suso broadly describes two aspects of ecstatic withdrawal, a negative one that emphasizes violent withdrawal, and a more positive mode that transposes ordinary language to suggest higher ways of sensing, knowing, and loving. The negative mode uses verbs and nouns formed from compounds of *ver-* and *ent-*, such as *verzucken* ('to be drawn up, or away'), *vergangen* ('to go out or over'), or 'sinking away' (*versinken*). He also talks of *entgangenheit* ('going out; of the senses), and *entwurket* ('being freed'). More positive language talks about a 'pull' (*zug*), a 'turning within' (*inker*), and a 'stroke within' (*inschlag*). Other new words highlight movement above (*überflug*, *übertart*, *überschall*). Suso's rich description of special states can be seen in Chapter 5 of the *Life*, where he talks about nine forms of consolation. The Dominican also talks about experiences of ecstatic song and of dancing with the angels. Here is a typical description of one of the Servant's ecstasies: «During this time he sank so completely in God into Eternal

<sup>35</sup> The passage from Pr. 101 is found in *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Stuttgart-Berlin 1936- , in *Die deutschen Werke*, Vol. IV.1, 355.

<sup>36</sup> R. Forman, *Meister Eckhart. Mystic as Theologian*, Rockport 1991, Chapter 5, discusses nine passages from the German works and two from the Latin that deal with *geziehen/gezücket* and *raptus*.

<sup>37</sup> K. Bihlmeyer, *Heinrich Seuse. Deutsche Schriften*, Stuttgart 1907. On Suso's mysticism, B. McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, New York 2007, Chapter 5, especially 222-29.

Wisdom that he was unable to speak of it.... He often felt that he was floating in the air and swimming in the deep flow of God's boundless marvels between time and eternity»<sup>38</sup>. John Tauler (d. 1361) spoke of ecstasy in a number of his sermons (e.g., Sermons 9, 39, 54, etc.), but it did not play as a large a role in his thought as in Suso's. For Tauler ecstasy is just the first stage of the threefold itinerary of the mystical life that consists of 'jubilation' (*iubilatio*), followed by 'poverty of spirit' (often involving much inner suffering), and concluding with 'essential conversion' (Sermon 39).

What can be called the 'ecstatic imperative' was also evident in many of the other vernacular mystics of the Late Middle Ages. Here I will note only three of the most important from different traditions: the Flemish Jan van Ruusbroec (d. 1381), the Italian Catherine of Siena (d. 1379), and the English Richard Rolle (d. 1349).

Ruusbroec wrote eleven vernacular mystical treatises. The central work is the *Spiritual Espousals* (*Die geestelike brulocht*), which is structured according to three forms of spiritual life (the active life, the interior life, and the contemplative, or superessential, life), with each form of life analyzed according to the four phrases of the Gospel text, «See, the Bridegroom is coming, go out, and meet him» (*Mt.* 25:6). Ruusbroec was a skilled phenomenologist of the mystical life, who describes various divine gifts and states of the soul in detail. It is in the interior life that he speaks of ecstatic states, showing that they play a role, although a secondary one, in his theology of the modes of uniting with God. Christ's 'coming' in the interior life takes place in three ways: in interior exercises in the lower powers; by the influx of divine gifts in the higher powers; and by the divine touch in the 'unity of spirit', or essence of the soul<sup>39</sup>. There are four modes of God's action in the lower powers: sensible fervor; spiritual inebriation; powerful attraction; and abandonment. The second and third of these describe states of rapture. For example, God's gift of inward consolation and sweetness produces a state of 'spiritual drunkenness' (*gheestelijcke dronkenheit*), which «means that a person receives more sensible relish and well-being than his heart or desire could long for or contain». According to Ruusbroec, this produces much 'strange behavior', such as singing, weeping, running, leaping, dancing, etc. (b395-402). It is a corporeal state, but one beyond normal behavior. The third mode, 'powerful attraction', features more language of ecstasy (b460-667). Here, Christ wants to draw all our faculties to himself: «This is the origin of the third mode of inner practice, by which a person is lifted up and enriched (*ghehoghet ende gheciert*) as to his affection and the lower part of himself» (b475-77). Ruusbroec speaks of this as a 'wound of love' and as 'an inward invitation' towards God's sublime unity. The heat of divine love produces both great pleasure and affliction. The impetuosity of love even leads to an «inner madness» (*innighen orewoede*: b520)

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<sup>38</sup> *Life*, Chapter 50 (ed., 173). For other important treatments of ecstasy, see Chapters 2, 5, 31, 32, 41, and 53.

<sup>39</sup> The edition with English translation is J. Alaerts, *Jan Van Ruusbroec. Die geestelike brulocht*, Turnhout 1988. The section on the three 'comings' is b160-b1602 (Dutch text) on 300-469.

that is accompanied by a number of spiritual experiences, such as «being drawn above the senses into the spirit» (b550), the reception of visions and revelations, and being caught up above the spirit and the self without being «altogether outside the self» (b558-60). «This», he says, «is called a rapture (*Dit hetet raptus*), which is as much to say as snatched away or taken away» (b565-66). It also grants the ecstatic cry that is called *jubileeren ochte jubilacie* (b578). So, there is an ample place for ecstasy in Ruusbroec's map of ascent, but only at a lower level.<sup>40</sup> The highest union for Ruusbroec does not take place in the senses or even in the soul's higher powers, but in superessential transformation into the dynamic love of the Trinity.

Catherine of Siena is arguably the greatest female mystic of the Late Middle Ages. Her *Life* written by her Dominican confessor, Raymond of Capua, has many descriptions of her visions and ecstasies, particularly those associated with receiving the Eucharist. The saint's own writings, her *Dialogue* (*Diologo*), a long conversation with God which she is said to have dictated in ecstasy, as well as her hundreds of letters, refer to her mystical gifts less often and mostly in indirect fashion. Catherine had a great devotion to St. Paul, whom she called 'the glorious trumpeter of God', so she often talks about Paul's rapture of 2 Corinthians 12 and at times involves herself in a like state. In *Dialogue* 79, noting Paul, she says that when the soul is fully at rest in God, she begins to experience lightness of spirit. God says: «Often, therefore, the body is lifted up from the ground because of the perfect union of the soul with me, as if the heavy body had become light». This levitation is accompanied by what came to be called 'ligature', or binding, of the senses: «For the eye sees without seeing, the ear hears without hearing, the tongue speaks without speaking [...] - All the members are bound and busied with the bond and feeling of love»<sup>41</sup>. In *Dialogue* 83 God says, «Paul had seen and tasted this [the divine sea of peace] when I drew him up to the third heaven, to the height of the Trinity. He tasted and knew my Truth... Paul's soul was clothed in me, the Eternal Father, through feeling and union, just as the blessed are in everlasting life, though his soul had not left his body»<sup>42</sup>. The hymn to the Father that closes the *Dialogue* is made by the soul in a state of drunkenness and rapture: «Then that soul was as if drunk with the love of poverty [...]. Although she was in the vessel of her body, it seemed as if the fire of charity within her had taken over and rapt her outside her body»<sup>43</sup>. Catherine of Siena was only the foremost in a long line of late medieval Italian mystics who enjoyed ecstatic experiences.

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<sup>40</sup> Ruusbroec was influential on many later mystics of the Low Countries, a number of whom have much to say about ecstasy. Among the most important is the Franciscan Hendrik Herp (d. 1471), whose *Mirror of Perfection* was widely read, especially in sixteenth-century Spain.

<sup>41</sup> *Dialogue* 79, in S. Noffke (trans.), *Catherine of Siena. The Dialogue*, New York 1980, 148. For more on levitation, see Letter 371.

<sup>42</sup> *Dialogue* 83 (Noffke, 152-53). For more on Paul's rapture, *Dialogue* 84, 96, as well as Letters 226 and 286.

<sup>43</sup> *Dialogue* 153 (Noffke, 325).

The fourteenth century, the 'Golden Age' of English mysticism, featured four major mystics: the hermit Richard Rolle (d. 1349); the Augustinian Walter Hilton (d. 1396); the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and other related works (active ca. 1380); and the anchoress Julian of Norwich (d. ca 1417). The apophaticism of the *Cloud* author leaves little place for ecstatic states. Hilton, as a spokesman for tradition, mentions ecstasy a number of times in his *Scale of Perfection*<sup>44</sup>, while Julian, although she began her career with a series of visions of the crucified Christ, does not talk about ecstasy in her two theological meditations on the visions. Rolle, however, was a noted ecstatic, whose accounts of a diversity of special states compares with his contemporary, Henry Suso. Rolle's ecstasies are deeply somatic, although they also feature descriptions of a kind of super-sensate ecstasy<sup>45</sup>.

Rolle is famous for his triad of mystical experiences of 'heat-sweetness-song' (*fervor-dulcor-cantor*), which he says are the essence of love and are to be identified with contemplation. These are sensate forms of ecstasy, but they also go beyond our usual sense operations. For Rolle, ecstasy and rapture are paradoxically both *within* and *beyond* the ordinary sensorium. The hermit's writings are filled with accounts of this triad, which he readily identifies with *raptus*, a term he mentions frequently in his major treatise, the *Fire of Love (Incendium amoris)*<sup>46</sup>. Especially important is the discussion of the two forms of ecstasy in Chapter 37. «The first», says the hermit, «is when a person is so carried outside fleshly sensation that during the time of rapture he does not feel anything in the flesh or what is done in the flesh. Nevertheless, he is not dead...». This is the standard view of rapture, but the second form is different and is described as «an elevation of the mind to God through contemplation». This rapture of love, he says, was that enjoyed by Christ, «who never experienced the loss of the body's control». It can also be experienced by Christ's followers. When the mind becomes stable, «fixed on one thing in the total act of love, it pants for Christ in a great ardor, stretching out and intent on him as if there were nothing else but these two people...». Such a soul, glued to Christ «through mental ecstasy (*excessus mentis*), lies beyond the cloister of the body and drinks down an absolutely marvelous draft from the heavens»<sup>47</sup>. Rolle's strange treatise, the *Melody of Love (Melos Amoris)*, a hyper-alliterative attempt to create a new form of ecstatic speech, is filled with the language of 'being raptured', 'soberly drunk', 'jubiling', and the like. Speaking of the heavenly music, for example, Chapter 44 proclaims: «O supreme solace, O heavenly secret hidden even to some of the select! O marvelous and more than marvelous melody so miraculous, not human but angelic, coming to mortals

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<sup>44</sup> Rapture is mentioned in Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* in Book 1.8, 1.46, and Book 2.11, 2.32, 2.34, 2.40, and 2.44.

<sup>45</sup> On Rolle's mysticism, B. McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, New York 2012, Chapter 10.

<sup>46</sup> The *Incendium amoris* speaks of rapture in twenty of its forty-two chapters. See M. Deansley, *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, Manchester 1915. *Sobria ebrietas* appears in Chapters 15, 42-43, and 45-46.

<sup>47</sup> *Incendium amoris*, Chap. 37 (ed., 254-55).

while they are still living! .... O how sublime they are and how highly lifted up from the depths, transported above temporal and transitory things, so that from above “they hear a voice like the voice of harpists harping on their harps!” (Apoc.14:2)»<sup>48</sup> Rolle’s mysticism of rapture continued on in England with figures like Margery Kempe (d. 1440), who often speaks of being ‘ravyschyd in spyryt’, and the Carthusian, Richard Methley (d. 1528), who was directly influenced by the hermit.

#### 4. Ecstasy in Early Modern Mysticism (1500-1700)

The mystics of the Early Modern Period inherited a rich tradition of ways of understanding ecstasy. Two tendencies become clear during this time. A number of mystics and mystical theologians continued the emphasis on ecstasy evident in the Late Middle Ages, though they rarely identified it with the ultimate stage of contact with God. On the other hand, an increasing stress on interior recollection, annihilation, and attaining a state of total quiet suggested that ecstasy/rapture and related experiences might detract from the naked faith that leads to union. The difference between the two approaches is evident in the disputes that led to the Quietist condemnations of the end of the seventeenth century, which marked the end of the classic period of Christian mysticism.

The sixteenth century was the great era of Spanish mysticism, though important Spanish mystics are also found in the seventeenth century. Spain did not lack for ecstatic female saints, as can be seen in figures like the Dominican Maria di San Domingo (d. 1524) and the Franciscan Juana de la Cruz (d. 1534). The most important mystical current of the time was the Franciscan ‘Recollection’ (*recogimiento*) tradition, which stressed interiorization and quiet contemplation as the way to union with God. The *recogimiento* authors did allow for rapture and sober intoxication as aspects of this interiorization, as we can see from Bernardino de Laredo (d. 1540) in his *Ascent of Mount Sion* (e.g., 3.30, 3.41), and Francesco de Osuna (d. 1542), whose *Third Spiritual Alphabet* of 1527 often talks about ecstasy (e.g., 5.2-3, 6.2, 11.4, 18.4, 19.2, 21.7). In this same period members of the diffuse movement called *Alumbradismo* (‘Enlightenment’) were accused of carrying interiorization too far into a state of quiet that rejected ecclesial and sacramental practice. The *Alumbrados* were not favorable to ecstasy.

Over the past century there has been growing recognition of Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556), the founder of the Jesuits, as a mystic, based on his *Autobiography* (*Acta*) and *Spiritual Diary* (*Diario*). The *Autobiography* shows Ignatius to have enjoyed many visionary experiences during the early years of the formation of the Jesuits, but these are not described as ecstasies. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Diary*, which consists of two fragmentary accounts from 1544 and 1545, is replete with

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<sup>48</sup> E. Arnould and F. Vendenbroucke (eds.), *Richard Rolle. Le Chant d’Amour*, 2 vols., Paris 1971, Vol. 2:116.

visions and auditory experiences of divine words (*loquela*). Once again, Ignatius does not use the language of ecstasy.

The most important figure for the history of ecstasy in this age was Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), the founder of the Carmelite Discalced reform. Teresa's writings on rapture and other mystical gifts are prolific, influential, and fluid, due to her developing views<sup>49</sup>. Teresa had been a nun at the unreformed convent of the Encarnacion at Avila for some twenty years before her conversion to a deeper life in 1554. Soon Teresa, as an ecstatic contemplative, began receiving a wide range of mystical gifts, such as visions (both imaginative and intellectual), locutions, delights, tastes, and ecstasies. At the command of her confessors she began writing these down, first in her *Spiritual Testimonies* (on ecstasy, see 1.2-3, 1.8, 1.11-29, 2.2) and more fully in her *Life (Vida)*, finished in 1565. The Carmelite insists that she is speaking out of her own experience, not out of book-learning. Teresa was an astute psychologist, examining with acuity the psychosomatic effects of her visions and ecstasies, but her purpose was didactic and theological – to present a personal narrative to show her readers how God acts in human life.

Rapture (*arrobamiento*) is a major theme of Teresa's mysticism (the word appears 108x, while *extasis* is used only 10x, and *rapto* 4x). The lost first version of the *Life* was a description of Teresa's life and mystical gifts. The second version continues this and introduces a treatise on the 'four waters' (Chaps. 11-22), providing a road map of the growth of prayer. Chapters 23-40 return to the account of Teresa's mystical gifts. Her earliest rapture seems to have happened about 1557. As Teresa was reciting the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*, she says, «a rapture came upon me so suddenly that it almost carried me out of myself. It was something I could not doubt, because it was very obvious» (*Life* 24.5). During this experience she received a divine locution, as well as a new sense of freedom and spiritual power. Various other accounts of rapture appear in these later chapters of the *Life* (e.g., 33.14-15, 34.2, 34.15-17, 35.6, 38.1, 38.5, 38.10-11, 38.17-18, 40.7-9). In the treatise on the four waters, rapture is portrayed as the ultimate experience of the fourth water. The third water is 'the sleep of the faculties', where the powers of the soul do not totally die, but cease to advert to their functioning. The third water also grants «inebriating love» (16.2). The account of the fourth water (Chaps. 18-22), the prayer of the union of the faculties with God, abounds in accounts of rapture, for which Teresa employs a variety of terms, such as 'elevation of the spirit' (*levantamiento de espíritu*) and 'swoon (*desmayo*) of the faculties' (20.1). Teresa insists that rapture is a higher gift than union: «The advantage rapture has over union is great. The rapture produces much stronger effects and causes many other phenomena» (20.1; see also 21.8). Chapter 20 goes on to discuss natural comparisons for rapture

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<sup>49</sup> I will cite Teresa's writings according to the translation of K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, 3 vols., Washington 1976-83. For a study of Teresa and the other Carmelites on ecstasy, see Tomás de la Cruz, *Extase. VI. Dans l'École Carmélitaine*, DS IV, col. 2154-60.

(20.2-4), rapture and levitation (20.4-8), the rapture of joy and the rapture of pain (20.9-16), the length of rapture (20.19), and the suspension (*suspensión*) of intellect and memory in rapture (20.20)<sup>50</sup>. The *Life* has one of the most detailed treatments of rapture in the Christian tradition, but in making it the highest stage of the mystical life Teresa is breaking with many earlier mystics.

Teresa's later writings moved beyond this view. The shift is first evident in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1565-70). Here Teresa uses the map of prayer set out in the *Life* to interpret the account of the love between the Divine Bridegroom and the soul. Ecstasy seems to be a developing process, starting from when the soul enjoys the kiss (Sg. 1:1) and begins to be drawn out of herself (Chaps. 1-3), and continuing in the second stage where the soul delights in the fragrance of the Bridegroom's breasts (Sg. 2a), which figures the prayer of quiet that communicates heavenly truth to the soul «in a kind of divine intoxication» (Chap. 4.2). This eventually produces the prayer of union. In the third stage, however, the soul awakens from its sleep and intoxication, but remains stupefied and dazed beyond the operation of the intellect until it tastes of the milk of the divine breasts (Chap. 4.4-6). The ecstatic delight of the contemplative bride described in Chapter 5-6 is not the goal. In Chapter 7 Teresa says that after undergoing a mystical death (*mors mystica*) the soul desires to combine contemplation and action, and «is asked to perform great works [= the flowers of Sg. 2:5] in the service of the Lord and of its neighbor. For this purpose it is happy to lose that delight and satisfaction» (Chap. 7.3; see also, 7.7-9).

Teresa's most mature work, *The Interior Castle (Moradas)* of 1577, continues this development. Although not written in the first-person, the work is obviously based on the nun's own experience. The seven 'Mansions' that constitute the soul's journey to meet the Trinitarian God dwelling within describe an interiorization of prayer that begins with our cooperation with God (Mansions I-III) and progresses to ever higher states of prayer and union where God alone is operative (Mansions IV-VII). In Mansion IV.3.11-12 Teresa warns against false states of rapture that are better called *abobamiento* (foolishness) than *arrobamiento* (see also VI.4.2 and 17). Mansion VI is the place of the 'spiritual espousal', which involves special states of experience, such as visions, ecstasies, and other mystical charisms<sup>51</sup>. The most important point about Mansions VI and VII is that now Teresa insists that ecstasy, while a high gift of God, is not the goal. The true end is the 'spiritual marriage' that takes place in the center of the soul (VII.1.5, and VII.2.3-6, 9-11; VII.3.10). In Mansion VII ecstasy is left behind as a hindrance to the fusion of Mary (representing contemplation) and Martha (action). Such advanced souls are able to be fully united with God at the same time that they are engaged in apostolic activity in the world (VII.1.8 and VII.3.12-14). Few souls attain this state, but when they do rapture is taken away from them (VII.3.12).

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<sup>50</sup> The suspension of the faculties is another frequent theme in Teresa's writings, with the term *suspensión* being used 22x. For a detailed treatment of suspension, see *Life* 18.10-14.

<sup>51</sup> In VI.6.1 Teresa says raptures are common in this Mansion.

In Mansion VI Teresa says rapture cannot really be described, but must be experienced (VI.4.17, VI.11.3). Nevertheless, she claims, «In a rapture, believe me, God carries off for himself the entire soul, and, as to someone who is his own and his spouse, he begins showing it some little part of the kingdom it has gained by being espoused to him» (VI.4.9). In digressive fashion she distinguishes three kinds of rapture. The first is when the soul is touched by some word about God and is burnt up in a union with God in which the faculties are absorbed (VI.4.3-11, VI.10.2). In this suspension God shows the soul divine secrets through either imaginative or intellectual visions (VI.4.5). The second type of rapture is described as «extreme suspensions», during which the soul may have «everything taken away at once», so that it seems almost dead (VI.4.12-17, VI.11.2-4). Finally, the third type is called a «flight of the spirit (*vuelo del espíritu*) that, although substantially the same as the other raptures, is interiorly experienced very differently», and sometimes even involves levitation (VI.5.1-11). In this rapture the soul receives infused knowledge «through an admirable intuition» (VI.5.8). Teresa goes into detail about the effects of these suspensions (VI.6.4-5; see also VI.9.3), which can involve inner *iubilus*, strange kinds of prayer, and sober drunkenness (VI.6.10-12). Concerning all these experiences the Carmelite sagely observes: «There are many holy persons who have never received one of these favors, and others who receive them but are not holy» (VI.9.16). In conclusion, we can say that if in the *Life* the ultimate experience of God is ecstatic rapture, in the *Interior Castle* the union of spiritual marriage is apostolic, non-ecstatic, and in the center of the soul.

Teresa's fellow reformer, John of the Cross (d. 1591), was more suspicious of special mystical experiences, especially visions, but he did maintain a place for rapture in his four prose works<sup>52</sup>. John's uncompromising dialectic of the stark choice between *todo* and *nada*, the 'All' of God and the nothingness of creatures, is the basis of his creation of the 'dark night' schema of the path to union. First, the senses and spirit must be purged *actively* by asceticism (*Ascent*, Bk. 1). Far more difficult is the *passive* purgation of the senses and spirit by dark faith. The passive purgation of the senses (*Ascent*, Bks. 2-3) involves a long treatment of such mystical gifts as sense apparitions, imaginative visions, locutions, even intellectual apprehensions which might detract from the practice of naked faith and therefore must be expunged (*Ascent* 2.10-32, and 3.9.4). Even more painful is the passive purgation of the spirit treated in *Dark Night*, Books 1-2. In such a rigorous program what role is there for the consolations of ecstasy? John says that the sensory 'raptures and transports' given to advanced souls remain dangerous (*Night* 2.1.2). Thus, he is against ecstatic experiences insofar as they are thought to give *positive* knowledge of God, but not insofar as the 'swoon of oblivion', a

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<sup>52</sup> John's four works are: the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the *Dark Night*, the *Spiritual Canticle*, and the *Living Flame of Love*. For a translation, K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Washington 1991. John discusses false raptures in *Ascent* 1.2.3 and the dangers of imperfect raptures in *Ascent* 2.1.2 and 2.2.3.

state of suspension caused by 'touches of union', allows the memory to be rid of all forms and to begin to enter into the habit of union (*Ascent* 3.2.4-8).

The *Ascent* and *Dark Night* concentrate on the negative side of John's program. The *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame* provide a broader picture in which the 'flame of love' features as strongly as the 'dark night. of faith. In these works John gives more attention to the ecstasy of love. *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 13-19, deal with the second stage of spiritual progress, that of illumination or 'spiritual espousal', in which (as with Teresa) the gift of rapture is present (Stanza 13, Introduction, and 2; Stanzas 14-15.8, and 17-18). John says that he will not dwell on ecstasy, since the «blessed Teresa of Jesus» has said much about it (*Canticle* 13.7), but he does use the language of the «flight of the spirit» (*Canticle* 13.5-8), as well as the inebriation of «the spiced wine of love» (*Stanzas* 25.7-11; 37.5; and 38.5). In the *Living Flame*, Stanza 3.3-5, John speaks of «the lamps of fire» by which God illuminates and warms the soul as «being received by the soul in the rapture of love». The Carmelite followers of Teresa and John, especially Tomás de Jesús (d. 1624) and Cecilia del Nacimiento (d. 1636), also dealt with rapture, as did the Franciscan mystic Juan de Los Angeles (d. 1609).

In the seventeenth century the center of attention shifted to France, although both Spain and Italy still made notable contributions to ecstatic mysticism. Many female mystics, such as Barbe Acarie (d. 1618) and Marie de l'Incarnation (d. 1672) in France, and Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi in Italy (d. 1607), were ecstatics<sup>53</sup>. The English Capuchin resident in France, Benet of Canfield (d. 1610), also experienced many raptures. His biographer claims that «his whole life from the three-and twenty years that he became a Capuchin was a continual rapt and perpetual ecstasy». Nonetheless, Benet does not dwell on ecstasy in his *Rule of Perfection*, probably because it did not fit in with his insistence on inner annihilation<sup>54</sup>. It seems that in certain seventeenth-century circles ecstasy was still of great importance, but that in others it had a less prominent place in the mysticism of interiority and annihilation. The figure who tried to keep the two tendencies together was Francis de Sales (d. 1624), the last great mystic of the classic tradition.

Francis's *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616) is an impressive synthesis of Catholic mysticism. Like many of his predecessors, Francis had a place for ecstasy within his theology of love of God and neighbor as the essence of the mystical path. In his earlier spiritual guidebook, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1608), Francis insisted that raptures and other spiritual gifts are not virtues, but only rewards that God sometimes gives souls (Book III.11). A more detailed picture of rapture, its forms, and role in the path to union emerges in the twelve books of *Treatise*. Book VI introduces the basic distinction between the affective

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<sup>53</sup> On the Italian female ecstatics, M. Petrocchi, *L'estasi nelle mistiche italiane della Riforma Cattolica*, Naples 1958.

<sup>54</sup> Benet of Canfield's *Rule of Perfection* occasionally mentions ravishment and inebriation (e.g., Book II.1, 2, and 6.4). The English Benedictine, Augustine Baker (d. 1641), describes his own raptures and also treats the topic in *Holy Wisdom*, Book 3.4.3 (nos. 6-40).

love that makes us pleasing to God and the effective love that helps us please God. Its treatment of the initial stages of mystical prayer includes discussions of meditation (Chap. 2) and contemplation (Chap. 3). In treating the differences between these two (Chap. 4-6), Francis mentions the presence of rapture and 'holy and sacred inebriation' in some forms of contemplation. Chapters 8-10 discuss mystical sleep, and Chapters 11-12 treat the various degrees of 'holy quiet'. The quiet of «simple acquiescence in the divine good-pleasure» is identified with «the height of love's ecstasy» (Chap. 11). This can also involve the liquefaction of the soul into God, which is «true ecstasy by which the soul transcends the limits of her natural form, being wholly mingled with, absorbed in, and engulfed in her God» (Chap. 12).

The most detailed treatment of ecstasy is found in Book VII which treats union with God. Chapter 3 proclaims that the «sovereign degree of union is by suspension and ravishment» (*par la suspension et ravissement*), while Chapters 4-6 set out an original theory of three forms of ravishment. Here, Francis de Sales is under the influence of Teresa's *Life* and the superior position it gave to ecstasy<sup>55</sup>, although his view, unlike Teresa, culminates in a non-ecstatic ecstasy. He begins with a definition: «An ecstasy is called a rapture inasmuch as God does thus rapture us and raise us up to himself, and a rapture is termed an ecstasy because by it we go out and remain out of and beyond ourselves in order to be united to God» (Chap. 4). There are three kinds: one belongs to the understanding and admiration; the second to the affection and devotion; and the third to action or operation (note the influence of Richard of St. Victor). Francis gives a detailed investigation of the ecstasy of affection and its relation to the ecstasy of understanding in Chapter 5, but Chapter 6 insists that it is the «ecstasy of life and action» that is the crown of the other two. By following both God's commandments and his holy inspirations, «we live not only a civil, honest, and Christian life, but a supernatural, spiritual, devout, and ecstatic life, that is, a life which is in every way beyond and above our natural condition»<sup>56</sup>. The best ecstasy is apostolic living.

Some of Francis de Sales's contemporaries did not give a large role to ecstasy. Pierre de Bérulle (d. 1629) speaks of the ecstasies of the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene, but does not say much about how present believers might come to ravishment. Bérulle also criticizes false absorptions and distracting 'suspensions of mind'. Other French mystics made more of ecstasy. The Jesuit Louis Lallemant (d. 1636) lists 'raptures, ecstasies, and visions' among the extraordinary forms of contemplation in his *Spiritual Doctrine*, but insists that these are not the goal of the mystical life (*Spiritual Doctrine*, Prin. VII, Chap. 4, arts. 1-8). Another Jesuit, Jean-Joseph Surin (d. 1664), discusses ecstasy and rapture in some detail

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<sup>55</sup> Referencing Teresa (*Life* 18.12-13), Francis distinguishes between trance or suspension when the union is short and ecstasy or rapture when it is long.

<sup>56</sup> Francis continues his treatment of the ecstatic life in Book VII.7-8, and adverts to it in several other places, e.g., Book X.10 and 17. For some other considerations of ecstasy, see Book I.10, and Book III.8.

in his *Spiritual Guide*, Part VII, Chapters 5-7. The blind Carmelite brother, Jean de Saint-Samson (d. 1636), in his spiritual handbook, *The Goad*, treats ecstasy and how to distinguish between good and false forms. Himself a noted ecstatic, Jean is said to have dictated his striking prose poem about divine love, the *Epithalamium*, in a state of rapture.

The late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a growing emphasis on interior withdrawal to a state of total quietude as the premier way to God. The 'mysticism of quiet' was nothing new, but some seventeenth-century mystics were accused of taking it too far, even to the neglect of exterior devout practices, to minimizing the role of the church, and to embracing states of antinomianism. Many of these so-called 'Quietists' did not put much stock in mystical charisms like rapture, considering them a distraction from inner annihilation and abandonment. At the end of the century some mystics, notably Miguel de Molinos, Cardinal Petrucci, Madame Jeanne Guyon, and Archbishop Fénelon were officially condemned for 'Quietism', and a number of deceased mystics were posthumously censured by having their writings put on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. The Spanish priest Juan Falconi de Bustamante (d. 1636) is an example. Falconi's *Spiritual Alphabets* show no interest in states of rapture in their emphasis on the 'one act' of the prayer of simple apprehension. In Chapter 14 Falconi criticizes the mystical heretics who «desire to be in a state of suspension, ease and quiet which in its nature is diabolical and vain». François Malaval's *Easy Practice for Raising the Soul to Contemplation* (1664) teaches that the soul should never seek ecstasies or special gifts, which can be a source of pride (Dialogue 8). Both books were later put on the *Index*.

The two major Quietists condemned for heresy in 1687 do mention ecstasy. Miguel de Molinos (d. 1696) published his mystical best-seller, the *Spiritual Guide* (*Guia Espiritual*), in 1675. Molinos recognized that many of his penitents were experiencing raptures, but he took a dim view of this, insisting that God wishes to purge the soul of its natural and supernatural attachments to such things as «internal communications, raptures, and interior ecstasies» (*Guide* I.7.3; see also II.6.46, 7.50-51, and 7.56). In Book III of the *Guide*, however, Molinos allows that «intoxication», or «mental excess and elevation of the soul», is found in the second stage of infused contemplation (III.15.134-35). Pier Matteo Petrucci (d. 1701), an Oblate and later Cardinal, was a friend of Molinos and a prolific mystical author. In his writings of the period 1674-82 Petrucci talks about inebriation, along with 'introversion, rapture, and ecstasy', especially in his apophatic the *Mystical Enigmas Unveiled*<sup>57</sup>. Petrucci's teaching on passive introversion, or 'being deprived of all things', involves ecstasy, that is, 'an elevation of the mind in God with abstraction from the external senses', as

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<sup>57</sup> See S. Stroppa and C. Cavicchioli (eds.), *Pier Matteo Petrucci. I Mistici Enigmi Disvelati* (1680), Florence 2009.

well as 'rapture' (*ratto*), which adds a note of 'effective sweet violence' to ecstasy – traditional Thomistic doctrine<sup>58</sup>.

The French chapter of the Quietist controversy pitted Madame Guyon (d. 1717) and her friend François Fénelon (d. 1715) against the formidable bishop, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (d. 1704). For the purpose of this survey, it is enough to note that while for both Guyon and Fénelon ecstasy had a role in mysticism, they did not think it was essential and considered that it could often be dangerous. In her *Life (Vie)* Guyon talks about the 'ecstasies, ravishments, and visions' that can accompany mystical states, but warns against them as possible illusions that detract from naked faith. The only good rapture is annihilation: «True rapture and perfect ecstasy are brought about by total annihilation in which the soul, losing all sense of self, passes into God without effort and without violence...» (*Life* I.9.10). She also insisted, following John of the Cross, that the virtue of faith should empty the soul of all extraneous illuminations, such as the visions, revelations, and ecstasies that might prevent it from losing itself in God. She does describe some ecstatic experiences, such as her 'state of expansiveness', when she was totally immersed in God (*Life* II.4.2-4), but she says this was more than mental ecstasy; it was a transformation that united the soul immediately to God. Guyon's desire was for absorption in God through annihilation, not a temporary ecstatic state (*Life* I.28.9). In her treatise the *Torrents* (ca. 1682) she says that souls experiencing ravishing intoxications cannot read or even pray, and therefore are in danger because they may think they have reached the summit of perfection, and are therefore «satisfied with the joy they have substituted for God himself» (*Torrents*, Part I.4.20). Permanent annihilation, not passing ecstasy, is her desire (*Torrents*, Part II.1.7).

Fénelon has a similar cautious attitude towards ecstasy as often misleading and not to be desired. His major mystical works, the *Gnostic of Saint Clement* and the *Maxims of the Saints*, which was subject to papal censure in 1699, mention rapture but dwell on its dangers. Like John of the Cross and others, Fénelon was suspicious of the extraordinary mystical phenomena that affected the lower powers, because they could endanger the path of faith and pure love. Ecstasies and paranormal gifts might well be deceptions of the devil. This is evident in Article XXIX of the *Maxims* where he warns the reader not to confuse true passive contemplation with «the suspensions of natural operations» that «are a sign that nature is not yet sufficiently purified...». When Bossuet launched his attack on Guyon and Fénelon in the 1690s in works such as his *Instruction on the States of Prayer*, it is obvious that he had a very different view of mysticism from the adherents of the mysticism of annihilation and the prayer of quiet, who insisted mysticism should be open to all. For Bossuet, mysticism was the realm of special miraculous graces given only to the few. Thus, ecstasy and gifts like the stigmata, levitation, and the like, were proofs of God's miraculous intervention. The condemnation of 'Quietists' engineered by Bossuet and his collaborators

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<sup>58</sup> In *I Mistici Enigmi*, cit., Quatrain II.4.6 (ed., 65-66), Petrucci says he will say no more about this, since it is treated so well by Teresa.

meant that their view of mysticism was to be victorious for the next two centuries and more. The eighteenth, nineteenth, and much of the twentieth century are filled with numerous accounts of ecstasies, largely by women. How much they really contributed to the history of Christian mysticism is still under review.

## 5. Conclusion

As this survey has attempted to show, ecstasy and its related terminology have had a significant role in Christian mysticism. Nonetheless, it is important to note that ecstasy is not the essence of mysticism, at least for most mystics. The deep ('mystical') dimension of Christian life is centered on enhancing the commandment of loving God and loving neighbor rooted in the Gospel and the baptismal grace given to all believers. Growth in charity has often involved forms of ecstatic contact with the God who is always *beyond* everything we can feel, know, and love in our limited ways. This is the realm of ecstasy – an important, but not essential, component in Christian mysticism.

Bernard McGinn  
University of Chicago  
✉ [bmcginn@uchicago.edu](mailto:bmcginn@uchicago.edu)