Contemporary Theological Explorations in Mysticism

GENDER AND MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM FROM INDIA TO EUROPE

Edited by

Alexandra Verini and Abir Bazaz

Gender and Medieval Mysticism from India to Europe

This book opens up a dialogue between pre-modern women identified as mystics in diverse locations from South Asia to Europe. It considers how women from the disparate religious traditions of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity expressed devotion in parallel ways. The argument is that women's mysticism demands to be compared not because of any essential "female" experience of the divine but because the parallel positions of marginalization that pre-modern women experienced led them to deploy intimate encounters with the divine to speak publicly and claim authority. The topics covered range from the Sufi devotional tradition of Sidis (Indians of African ancestry) to the Bhakti poet Mīrābaī and the nuns of Barking Abbey. Collectively the chapters show how mysticism allowed pre-modern women to speak and act by unsettling traditional gender roles and expectations for religious behavior. At the same time as uncovering connections, the juxtaposition of women from different traditions serves to highlight distinctive features. The book draws on a range of disciplinary expertise and will be of particular interest to scholars of medieval religion and theology as well as history and literary studies.

Alexandra Verini is an Assistant Professor of English at Ashoka University.

Abir Bazaz is an Assistant Professor of English at Ashoka University.

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Edited by Alexandra Verini and Abir Bazaz

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1 Introduction

Alexandra Verini

This volume takes a gendered approach to the comparative study of mysticism that draws from competing views of mystical discourse. It puts devotional material from different cultures and geographic regions into conversation in a manner that takes inspiration from a perennialist approach to mysticism. However, we do not reproduce the assumption, represented by thinkers such as William James, R.C. Zaehner, F.C Happold, W.T. Stace, and Rudolf Otto, that all mysticism taps into a universal source. Rather, the essays in this volume echo a constructivist/contextualist assumption, as championed by Steven T. Katz (1978; 1983), that mysticism reflects its social circumstances. At the same time, we are far from suggesting that there is a single way to think about the relationship between history and mysticism or that it is not possible to forge valuable comparative connections across cultures.

While the essays in this volume attend to the historical particularities of mysticism in medieval Europe and South Asia (and to a lesser degree North Africa and the Middle East), they also collectively reveal points of convergence across different traditions. These emerge not because women are "naturally" inclined to the mystical dimensions of religion nor because there is a single mystical current running through all spirituality but because the religious traditions in which women operated were (and often still are) patriarchal. We hence propose a study of mysticism as a phenomenon that is always already marked by gender. Despite the differences in cultural and religious context between the figures in this book, a common denominator is that traditionally most religions in the pre-modern world assumed that women were to have less power than men. Such parallel modes of restraint engendered common methods of resistance, for, at similar moments in the past, we find women engaging with the intimate and personal aspects of religion to claim authority. We also find the idea of womanhood or of the feminine being invoked to characterize certain kinds of intimate relationships with god. As they reveal commonalities alongside differences, the essays in this volume thus enact the kind of cross-cultural conversation that is found in perennialist scholarship but often rely on a contextualist standpoint to do so, charting a method of feminist comparison that draws from but exceeds

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both approaches. In what follows, I unpack this volume's use of the terms "mysticism" and "medieval"; give a brief overview of women's place with mystical aspects of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity; discuss the practice of comparison; point to some gaps in the present study; and give an overview of the chapters in this book.

What's in a Term?

Before considering how women in different geographies during the medieval past engaged in what is called "mysticism" to claim authority, we need first to unpack the term itself. Derived from the Greek word "*muein*" (to close the eyes, lips, and ears), mysticism evokes Greek mystery cults with secret initiation rites. Later, in the early Christian church, the term "*mustikos*" referred to the hidden allegorical interpretation of scripture (Bouyer 1980; King 1999, 14). During the fourth and fifth centuries, these Greek and Christian understandings merged in Augustinian thinking to connote an experiential union in the love of God.

In *Mystic Fable,* Michel De Certeau (1992) maps the history of the word "mystic" and argues that it was only in the sixteenth century that it came to acquire the meanings that we associate with it today as hidden, eluding to direct knowledge and "spiritual." This type of mysticism, according to him, is characterized, in the work of religious thinkers like Meister Eckhart and Theresa of Avila, as language that surpasses linguistic limits. Mysticism in this Christian context is often understood as "religious knowledge gained by means of an extraordinary experience or revelation of the divine" (King 1999, 7). Other commonly identified characteristics include the surrender of the individual will to god, ineffability, transience, and the assumption of a private, intimate, and direct relationship with the divine (James 1902, especially 287–88).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth, scholars began to understand mysticism in a manner that was seemingly more universal and less tied to the Church. In Anglo-Catholic writer Evelyn Underhill's words, in this new perspective, "the mystic way is best understood as a process of sublimation, which carries the correspondences of the self with the Universe up to *higher levels than those on which our normal consciousness works*" (1980, 29–30). This Greek-Christian-derived term thus came to be applied to other traditions (though often still from a quite Christian perspective) such as Bhakti and Sufism to describe a desire to establish a personal relationship with the divine.

These two spiritual approaches co-existed in medieval South Asia, a primary locus for this volume. Bhakti, a word that derives from the root "bhaj" meaning "to share" or "devotion," is primarily associated with what is now called Hinduism (though it is also a practice in Sikhism, and there are Bhakti saints who are dually honored by Muslims and Hindus).[1] The Bhakti movement is said to have originated in the South of India in the seventh century and to have moved north from there reaching its peak in the

sixteenth century (Hawley 2005). Bhakti in North India, much like every other part of culture after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, was significantly influenced by Islamic, especially Sufi, discourses. Sufism, possibly derived from the term "wool-wearer" or from the Arabic root, which gives us the Hindi word *saaf* (Pure), emerged as a practice with a focus on personal experience of god and divine Love. While different in myriad ways from Christian mysticism, Bhakti and Sufism share an interest in individual union with the divine and similarly resulted in rich vernacular traditions, which include some of the earliest writings by women. It is due to the particular commonalities of these three traditions that they appear juxtaposed in this volume.

It is important to recognize not only that the term mysticism derives from the Christian tradition but also that it was not used in English until 1736 (OED). While mysticism might be perceived as anachronistic, it offers a useful rubric in which to think through the expression of intimate relationships with god across religions and, for the purposes of this volume, to identify a common site at which medieval women's contributions to religion have been recognized. Mysticism is a word with a complicated legacy, with origins in western early modernity, yet it is nonetheless useful in thinking through the relations between practices of inner self-realization across different traditions. As Louis Nelstrop (2009) argues, so long as we are "aware that this term is modern and subject to modern theoretical debate," there is no reason why we cannot apply the term to medieval subjects. We only need to be mindful of our reasons for doing so (2). Rousseva-Sokolova writes in Chapter 9 of this volume, "As problematic as the concept may be, such a positioning opens the door to comparative explorations across theological frameworks, beyond the boundaries of religion itself and into the field of psychology." In this volume, even though not all the essays name the phenomenon they examine as mysticism—Lazakani and Akepiyapornchai do not use this term in their essays; Chakravarty notes that there is no Bangla word for mystic; Rousseva-Sokolova points to the difficulty of translating the term "mysticism" into Indian languages—we rely on mysticism as a framing concept because of the way it has historically brought together thinkers from different faiths across Europe and South Asia.

Like "mysticism," the term "medieval" is an imperfect one to describe the disparate figures in this book. It comes from a European context and alludes to phenomena that are specific to Europe. Indeed, the use of the term medieval for South Asia has been critiqued (Ali 2014). However, like mysticism, the medieval has come to be used to describe the period before the modern in a wide variety of cultures. It joins different geographies at a similar moment in time in a way that is recognizable for scholars in different fields, and we are not currently in the possession of another term that would be so recognizable. For this reason, we use "medieval" in our title not as a homogenizing term nor as a definitive one but as an imperfect one that carries many meanings.

Women's Mysticism Across Religious Traditions

The essays in this volume take various approaches to mysticism. Some include women writers and thinkers who are well within the canon of mystical theology such as Margery Kempe, Rabi'a al-Basri, or Mirabai. Others examine women like the Bengali poet Khona, the nuns of England's Barking Abbey, or the readers of the early Middle English *Ancrene Wisse,* who would not so readily be thought of as mystics. Some essays rely heavily on the term mysticism while others do not. Many essays are about women but others such as Rousseva-Sokolova and Akepiyapornchai explore femininity or gender fluidity within mysticism rather than and in addition to women themselves. Some essays consider mystical devotion within a specific medieval historical timeframe while others engage in conversations across centuries. What these essays share, however, is an interest in how gender informs individual as well as communal relationships with the divine. In this, they at once operate within current definitions of mysticism and expand them.

Gender is integral to mystical experience in a number of ways. Just as most experiences are gendered, so too is the experience of god. Moreover, mysticism or intimate devotion was often a site at which pre-modern women accessed agency. While as Katz (1983) has observed, mystical experiences are not necessarily inventive and can be conservative, they did often enable people and women in particular in the medieval world to take radical stances on both religious and political matters. At similar moments in time, women across Europe and South Asia in particular claimed intimate and direct experience of god, leaving behind a rich vernacular tradition, both written and oral, that describes intimate, emotive, and often erotic relationships with the divine. Grace M. Jantzen (1995) has shown that the picture of mysticism passed down by William James as a private and subjective experience can "be used to reinforce stereotypes of women as the spiritual nurturers of humanity while keeping both women and spirituality firmly domesticated" (2). The essays in this volume, as they show the deployment of visions to political and practical ends challenge this perception of mysticism and reveal the way in which its gendered and political dimensions are often joined.

The reason that this mode of devotion may have been attractive to women is that most of the world's religions, certainly the three examined in this book, displayed at best an ambivalent attitude towards women. Women were barred from most official spiritual roles often prevented from engaging directly with scripture, which was key to text-based religions. In Christianity, Paul's injunction against women's preaching (I Timothy 2: 12) served as a basis for denying women entry into the priesthood. Women, hence, were seldom instructed in Latin, the language of the Bible. In Judaism, many Rabbis opposed teaching the Torah to women because women's learning was deemed to be connected with cunning or deviousness, which, some feared, they might use for evil purposes (Grossman 2012, 155). In the Hindu tradition, men were appointed as priests and given knowledge of Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas.

Contrary to stereotypes, Islam did not condemn the feminine element as strongly as its Christian counterparts (Schimmel 1975, especially 426–35; Schimmel 2003), but women similarly generally played a more minor role in the transmission of religion although, women could lead men in prayer in Islamic Hanbali communities.

In many medieval religions, the separation of women from spiritual authority was related to their association with sin. In Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the biblical Genesis story that blamed Eve for eating the apple offered by Satan resulted in a generalized portrayal of women as temptresses. In this context, women were associated with the body and, hence, not with the spiritual realm. This view of women's bodies as sinful and impure manifested in a variety of religious practices. In Judaism, the mikveh, or ritual bath, while it can be a positive, empowering practice, was derived from the notion that women needed to purify themselves after menstruation or childbirth (Rieder 2016, 19). In Jainism and Hinduism, women's ability to obtain *moksha*, escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, has been widely debated with some sects with the Digambara Jain sect maintaining that *moksha* is not possible in a female body (Vallely 2019, 10). As Manasicha Akepiyapornchai's essay in this volume shows, cowherd women of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community in some theological lines of reasoning could attain liberation only because they were thought to have been high-caste male brahmins in their previous births.

Given these stereotypes and restrictions, it makes sense that women in particular would be drawn to a form of spirituality that emphasized a direct relationship with the divine, often affirming the feminine aspects of that divine presence. All three of the religious traditions covered in this volume saw a significant "flowering"—to use Bernard McGinn's term—of mystical aspects and of women's participation between 700 and 1500 CE, so much so that women are prominent in mystical currents of Christianity, and Hinduism and, though to a lesser degree, Islam. Starting in the eighth century, women Sufis appeared in the Islamic world, in the Middle East, North Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia (Schimmel 1982). Many of these women composed poetry about their experiences, which was often first transmitted orally and later copied down. One of the earliest women in this group, Rabi'a of Basra (c. 714–801 CE), also known as Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya al-Qaysiyya, who appears in Ayoush Lazakani's essay in this volume, devoted herself to an ascetic life, withdrawing into the desert to live in solitude and seek communion with God. She composed poems about divine love. Fatima of Nishapur (d. 838) is known for having abandoned a life of luxury to pursue the Sufi path. Sha'wana (eighth century CE) was a Persian woman known for her devotion to God. Her prayers are recorded in the writings of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE). Rumi's Mawlawiyya Sufi Order appointed female shaykhs such as Gunash Khan and Arifa-yi Khwush-liqa-yi Qunawi to head dargahs (Küçük). Women did not necessarily have the centrality that they did in Christian traditions, but they could also be Sufi teachers. Fatima of Cordoba

(twelfth century CE), for instance, trained Ibn Arabi. Halima of Damascus (ninth century CE) was known as Rabi'a of Syria's teacher.

A century or so later, in medieval Europe, Christian women in even more plentiful numbers also claimed spiritual and political authority through mystical encounters. The German abbess Hildegard of Bingen recorded her visions of God and the cosmos in the illuminated work *Scivias* (completed c. 1151 CE) as well as in *Liber vitae meritorum* and *De operatione Dei*. In the low countries, the Beguines, a group of women (and a few men) who lived collective religious lives outside of the enclosure of convents, recorded erotic visions of God and Jesus Christ. Hadewijch of Antwerp (1200–1248 CE), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210–1282 CE), and Marguerite Porete (1250–1310 CE), who appears in Louise Nelstrop and Pol Hermann's essay in this volume, all had mystical experiences of God that they described in vernacular poetry and prose. Their writings were characterized by longing and desire and new varieties of apophatic language (Nelstrop and Magill 2009). In the later Middle Ages, women like Angela of Foligno (1248–1309 CE), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380 CE), Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1416 CE), and Margery Kempe (1373–1439 CE), who appears in Katherine Zieman's essay in this volume, also wrote (or had scribes write) about their visions of Jesus Christ. In these visions, they claimed special relationships with God, especially in his human form, and, in some cases, became venerated within the Church.

Within Hinduism, Bhakti, unlike the Sanskritic textual tradition, was open to women and members of the lower castes, who composed poems, often orally at first rather than in written form, in vernacular languages of the Indian subcontinent about passionate devotion to their gods. Their poems, like those of Sufis, were transmitted orally and later written down. Some of their works gave importance to everyday activities, including domestic work as we find in Janabai's descriptions of the stone mill; others celebrated women's decisions to break free from domestic life and pursue a path of devotion. For instance, Karaikkal Ammaiyar (c. 400 CE) from Tamil Nadu in South India prayed to Shiva to free her from her worldly beauty. Her hymns celebrate her subsequent transformation into a ghoul and her singular devotion to Shiva. Andal (seventh or eighth century CE), also from Tamil Nadu, was a devotee of Vishnu and is credited with Tamil works *Thiruppavai* and *Nachiar Tirumozhi*, which contain hymns and verses in the Vaishnavite tradition. Akka Mahadevi (d. 1160 CE) from Kannada, who features in Dean Accardi's essay in this volume, wrote over 430 poems, called *vachana*, declaring that she belonged to Shiva and announcing her decision to forsake worldly life to devote herself to him. Janabai (d. 1350), a Marathi servant who lived with the famous Bhakti poet, Namdev, wrote over 300 poems praising the divine love of Vitthal, an avatar of Vishnu, and depicting herself as at one with him. Lal Ded (c. 1320–1392) of Kashmir, who also features in Accardi's essay, is known for wandering naked and reciting her *vakhs*, which draw from Hindu, Islamic, and Sufi traditions.

The aristocratic Rajasthani poet-saint Mirabai (c. 1498–1547), who is treated both by Katherine Zieman and Nancy Martin in this volume, is known for having rejected the practice of sati after her husband's death and wandering on pilgrimage, declaring Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, as her true husband. In Hinduism, as in Islam and Christianity, the democratization of spirituality had a base in female religious culture.

Our efforts to draw attention to women's mystical traditions and femininity within mysticism do not constitute a suggestion that there is some essential "feminine mysticism." This is a point that Amy Hollywood has critiqued when she suggests that a focus on the body in studies of women's mysticism reinforces a dichotomy between "feminine mysticism" and "masculine mysticism." She argues that such embodied, affective accounts of spirituality also appear in the writings of men and that male and female mystical thought was not distinctly separate (2002, 8). Jantzen (1994) notes the potential danger of the association of women with mysticism: "the alleged inexpressibility of mystical experience correlates neatly with the silencing of women in the public arena of the secular world: women may be mystics, but mysticism is a private, intense experience not communicable in everyday language and not of political relevance" (191). Indeed, as Jantzen also points out, women's experiences do not necessarily bear the traits of perennialist mysticism: as the essays in this volume reveal, women's mysticism could often be more communal, political, and public than traditional notions of mysticism imagine.

Women's association with mysticism is not the result of "some universal feminine traits" but, as Hollywood writes, results from "the specific set of social and cultural constraints that women faced in the late medieval and early modern periods" (2002, 12). It is this set of constraints perhaps that allowed mysticism, as French theorist Luce Irigaray puts it, to become "the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly" (1985, 191). This capacity of mysticism, as a mode of intimate contact with the divine, to disrupt gender norms is not exclusive to the West. As the essays in this volume find, mysticism or religious contemplation from an array of religious traditions offered a vehicle through which women could evade patriarchal spiritual monopolies, blur gender binaries, and establish their own spiritual as well as political authority.

Comparison

Putting writing by and for women, as well as writing that blurs gender binaries, from disparate traditions into conversation will reveal throughlines as well as differences. As Susan Standford Friedman in her essay "Why Not Compare?" writes, "on the one hand, comparison compels recognition of commensurability—likeness; but, on the other hand, comparison acknowledges incommensurability—difference" (757). Comparison not only acknowledges difference but also can make this difference a fundamental part of its critical work. Friedman continues, "Comparison puts incommensurability

and commensurability into a dynamic inter-play reflected in the slash that separates and connects: in/commensurability" (758). This volume by setting together essays on an array of religious figures from different places and moments in history engages in such interplay across space as well as across time.

While comparative work on medieval mysticism is extensive, feminist perspectives in this field have been more limited, as Nelstrop notes in her essay for this volume. Starting in the 1980s, scholars of feminist Christian theology like Caroline Walker Bynum (1988), Amy Hollywood (2001 and 2010), and Barbara Newman (1995) engaged in studies that put women writers across Europe into conversation. Books that bring together Sufi women across time and space include Abbas (2002), Aftab (2022), Helminski (2003), Pemberton (2010), and Sulamī and Cornell (1999). Bhakti women are collected in both academic books and publications for broader audiences including Jha (2022), Mullatti (1989), and Mulchandani (2019). Such studies rely on gender as a common factor and draw together women from different regions, languages, and time periods to draw larger conclusions about women's roles within a specific religious tradition.

Comparative studies of women's mysticism across faiths are rarer but also exist. Early studies within comparative religion, such as R. Otto's *Mysticism East and West* (1932), foregrounded men's writings, but feminist theologians have more recently turned to women. An early example is Bynum et al.'s (1988) *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, which examines gender-related symbols in contexts ranging from Taiwanese folk religion to South Asian poetry about Krishna. P. Martin (2001) compares the writings of beguines Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp with Indian tantra to show how both extoll the quality of love but from different approaches. In her dissertation, Jayita Singha (2015) compared women mystics in medieval England and Maharashtra. Holly Hillgardner (2017) puts Hadewijch and Mirabai into dialogue, finding that each woman practiced a full-bodied longing for love coupled with ascetic discipline. In this study, Hillgardner argues for a comparative theology of passionate nonattachment that works through the relationship between desire and renunciation. Martin's essay in this volume picks up where Hillgardner leaves off, examining the complexities of using Mirabai in a comparative study. Other comparative studies not exclusively focused on women nonetheless foreground gender. For instance, A.S. Lazikani's (2020) comparative study of emotion in Arabic Islamic and English Christian contemplative texts between c. 1110 and 1250 CE engages in comparative readings of male Sufi scholars such as Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240 CE) and Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari (d. 1269 CE) in conversation with works authored for women in England: *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1225 CE) and the *Wooing Group* (c. 1225 CE). The present volume intervenes in these burgeoning conversations between Christian and/or Islamic and/or Hindu forms of mysticism, widening the geographic expanse and range of approaches. By looking at so many different varieties of mysticism,

we create a vast network of comparative possibilities and both expand and question the category of mysticism itself.

Of course, there are risks to such comparisons. As Richard King (and Lazakani and Martin in this volume) points out, "terms such as 'religion' and 'mysticism', as well as constructs such as 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' … have a discursive history that is bound up with the power struggles and theological issues of Western Christianity" (211). Indeed, the concept of woman is also culturally specific. As Rajyashree Pandey, points out in the context of medieval Japan, Anglo-centric terms like "woman" and "body" need to be reconfigured in different cultural contexts (2016, 5). The terms that we use, therefore, need to be understood as imperfect vehicles for connection rather than as defining categories, and we need to be careful about how they operate in cross-cultural comparisons.

Citing the difficulty of using Christian-derived terms to characterize experiences from other traditions, King suggests that a comparative study of "religion" in a postcolonial space needs "to develop new conceptual models and methodological frameworks" (211). It is for this reason that our approach to comparison in this book is various. We include scholars from a variety of fields—religious studies, South Asian studies, rhetoric, and literary studies—and do not impose a single definition of mysticism. Some essays join two mystics from different cultures, while others focus on just one tradition, cross-pollinating rather than imposing neat lines of comparison. Our methodological framework thus resembles what Eve Sedgewick (2003) might call "beside," a notion that "permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: non-contradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object" (8). This kind of approach counters "dualistic thinking" and instead "comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations"(8). Such a notion is a useful corollary to the work that the essays in this volume do. They do not propose a single notion of religion, mysticism, or gender but rather offer a range of models, some emphasizing the way mystical visions bring women together (Maude), others emphasizing the singularity that mysticism carves out (Zieman), and some questioning the value of the category of mysticism itself, particular for traditions outside of Christian Europe (Martin, Lazakani).

Gaps in This Study

This volume only begins to skim the surface of what a more extensive study of gender and mysticism across the globe might do. There are many more women mystics than we have been able to include and many religious traditions that are not covered. The limitations that the COVID-19 pandemic put on many of us meant that some of the essays that we wanted to include

in this volume could not be written. Here, I mention just a few of the figures and traditions that might be included in further explorations of this topic. In Jainism, for instance, there is evidence of important women ascetics (Sethi 2020). Marudevi, the mother of the first Tirthankara, is said to be the first soul to have achieved *moksha*. Equally, stories of *satis*, women whose chastity grants them miraculous powers, are popular. There is also a concept of a third sex in Jainism (Zwilling and Sweet 1996), which resonates in compelling ways with the gender fluidity described by Akepiyapornchai and Rousseva-Sokolova in this volume. Within Daoism, Sun Bu'er is a twelfth-century woman master (Cleary 1989). Having taken up the study of the Dao later in life, she is known for her poems about her visionary experiences. In Buddhism, Yeshe Tsogyal, the consort of Tri Songdetsen, emperor of Tibet, and disciple of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century tantric master, is known as a mystic. She is known for transcribing Padmasambhava's teachings and as an example of enlightenment in female form (The Terton Drime Kunga and Yeshe Tsogyal 2017). Cases of medieval Jewish women mystics are rarer for reasons detailed by Koren (2011): medieval Jewish male mystics argued that the changing states of the female body due to menstruation disqualified women from mystical connection with God. However, Francesca Sarah (sixteenth century CE) from Safed, the center of the Kabbala movement, offers an exception. She is described in Rabbi Chaim Vital's *Sefer ha-Ḥezyonot* ("The Book of Visions") as having had visions and—very unusual for a woman—possessing a *maggidim*, an angelic spirit that was associated with the highest spiritual leaders (Chajes 2012, 102). Figures such as these and many more from the medieval period offer rich material for further studies of comparative gender and mysticism.

While it may only skim the surface of possible subjects for the study of gender and mysticism from India to Europe, this volume opens up avenues for future comparison and comparative thinking across traditions. We hope to deploy comparative connections across cultures to emphasize the vital role that gender plays within religion and to foreground mysticism as a space that, far from being exclusively private and apolitical, was a vital site of feminist resistance and activism.

Book Overview

We have divided the chapters of these books into four sections based on the larger interventions that the essays make although there are, of course, multiple meeting points across all of the essays even across sections. In the first section, the essays contemplate how spirituality offered medieval women a powerful means to resist prescribed gender norms. The experience of direct contact with god enabled women from three different religions to defy patriarchal restrictions and claim their own authority.

Ayoush Lazakani's "Tear-Language: Weeping as Resistance in Islamic and Christian Contemplative Hagiography" analyzes medieval Christian and

Islamic hagiography to reveal women's weeping as a form of resistive discourse. Considering a range of texts, this chapter compares the practices of several Sufi women with those of the Beguine Marie d'Oignies. This essay complicates the term mysticism, choosing instead to refer to the women it discusses as contemplative, asking how we can best access women's experiences within male-authored texts. Lazakani fins that both for women like Rābiʿa and ʿAisha the Wife of Abū Ḥafṣ of Nishapur and for Marie, tears, rather than acting as emblems of a disempowered feminized other, accrue pedagogic power and allow women to resist misreadings of their devotional practice. Lazakani's essay thus opens up a field in which cross-cultural comparison of religious women can lead to a reevaluation of women's affective practices, in the past and today.

Kathryn Maude's "Mysticism Between Women in Early Medieval England" locates mysticism in England's early medieval period through the late-eleventh-century records of Barking Abbey, focusing particularly on Goscelin's lives of Wulfhilda and Etheldreda. Maude finds that the Barking nuns' visionary experiences of their predecessors form the basis for a communal resistance that empowers them to defy male clerical figures. This essay makes several compelling interventions into the study of mysticism: first, it shows how records written by men can be used to access women's experiences, and second, it complicates the assumption that mysticism is exclusively or even primarily a solitary experience instead revealing a form of women's mysticism that is practiced across community.

Katherine Zieman's "Slander and Interiority: Margery Kempe, Mirabai, and Public Devotion" pairs the English medieval mystic Margery Kempe with Rajasthani Bhakti saint-poet Mirabai. This comparison reveals the striking similarities between these very different figures—the subjection of their public personae to slander, their eroticized piety, their rejection of the domestic sphere, and their mystical marriages—arguing that each exhibits a "defiant devotion" that stands at odds with social relations. Zieman uses this comparison to explore commonalities between these women's interiority but also, in her discussion of the very different transmissions of their works, reminds us of the importance of cultural context in thinking through such comparisons. This chapter introduces a method that takes difference alongside similarity into account using these two factors together to build a relationship between women mystics that reveals how mysticism enabled them to resist dominant norms while resisting the urge to homogenize that resistance.

The second section of this volume contains essays that challenge traditional definitions of mysticism, dealing with figures who would normally not be considered mystics. Subhashree Chakravarty's "Tongue Untied: Women and Forbidden Speech in Medieval India" examines the life and legend of the Bengali poet Khona. Known almost exclusively in Bengal, Assam, and Orissa in India and in Bangladesh, Khona is remembered more as an astronomer and mathematician than as a mystic and is, like many women in this volume,

partly or mostly mythical. Chakravarty argues that while Khona did not declare herself to be a mystic (indeed an exact equivalent of this word does not exist in Bangla), religion nonetheless played a major role in shaping her identity and reputation. The situating of Khona's poetry and her later reputation within a spiritual register legitimized her resistance to patriarchy. Chakravarty's chapter thus speaks to the theme of resistance in the previous section but also introduces a different approach as it considers the significance of including figures who are not normally considered as mystical within this domain.

Aparna Chaudhuri's "Enclosed Life and Mystical Form in *Ancrene Wisse*" focuses on a thirteenth-century English text for anchoresses, the *Ancrene Wisse,* and the question of its mystical elements. Rather than wading into the muddy and well-rehearsed debate of whether to call the text mystical, Chaudhuri instead examines the presence of God within the work's descriptions of asceticism. Leading with a discussion John Cassian's *Conferences* (*Conlationes*) as an antecedent for the *Ancrene Wisse*'s binary between physical practices and contemplation, the essay then shows how the *Ancrene Wisse* shifts to a more internal model of asceticism but also uses metaphors of social relationships to characterize this devotion. This chapter examines the ways in which the *Ancrene Wisse* blurs binaries between material and more abstract forms of devotion, revealing a mode of Christian mystical asceticism that does not turn away from the world but rather gains value through its materiality and through its position outside Church hierarchy.

Manasicha Akepiyapornchai's "Gender Fluidity in Śrīvaiṣṇava Theology: The Status of the Cowherd Women" explores how the medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, which has been active in Tamil Nadu, South India, since the tenth century, treats the story of the cowherd women who were devoted to the Hindu god Krishna. Akepiyapornchai shows that while women were generally barred from attaining liberation in the doctrine of bhakti, works such as the Sanskrit *Nyāyasiddhāñjana* by Vedāntadeśika alongside earlier Tamil poetry in the *Tiruvāymoḻi* by Nammāḻvar suggested that these cowherd women were, in fact, men in previous lives and so could be capable of attaining liberation. Akepiyapornchai links this medieval Tamil theological view of gender fluidity to Judith Butler's notion of ec-tasy using this to shed light on the tension between regulatory norms and fluidity within devotion. This chapter thus sheds light not only on the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition in particular but also on the ways in which the mystical dimensions of religion can undo gender norms and hierarchies.

The third section includes essays that examine how the figure of the woman mystic has been shaped and reimagined over time. Dean Accardi's "The Discipline of Mahadevi and Lalla: Religious Ambiguity in the Gendering of Ascetic Female Hindu Saints" juxtaposes Mahadevi from 12th-century Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh with Lalla from 14th-century Kashmir, thus working comparatively across regions as well as between

religions (given Lalla's associations with Sufism) in South Asia. Separated by two centuries, these women are often read as feminist role models and are linked due to their common propensity to wander naked and expound verses. Accardi instead takes a different approach and looks at their afterlives. Focusing on two sixteenth-century hagiographical texts, the *Sunyasampadane* for Mahadevi and the *Tazkirat al-'Arifin* for Lalla, he finds that these potentially subversive saints were resignified to be safe and acceptable to male religious communities who perceived womanhood and its association with the body as threatening. This essay thus reveals the utility of the figure of the resistant woman mystic to male communities and the ways in which these women's reputations could be reshaped and reworked to fit various agendas.

Galina Rousseva-Sokolova, in "Kabir, Femininity, and Mysticism," considers how one of the most famous medieval Indian poets and mystics, Kabir, mobilized a version of femininity to articulate his vision of transcendent reality. This chapter looks particularly at how what the author calls sublimated femininity in various forms—Kabir speaking as a woman separated from her lover, as a new bride, as a wife distressed by her in-laws, and as a woman deterred by a female neighbor—links Kabir's religious message to domestic life and so gives readers emotive and intimate access to the mystical realm. As Rousseva-Sokolova contends, these varying representations of the feminine within a mystical context give us insight into societal dynamics and power relations in pre-modern North India. By looking Kabir, this chapter reveals how gender and the idea of woman, in particular, pervade not only women's devotion but mysticism as a whole. As the chapter shows, this notion of gender, rather than being natural, is one that is constructed and made through social relations over time.

Nancy M. Martin's "Invoking Mirabai: Elision and Illumination in the Global Study of Women Mystics" concludes this section. This chapter looks at the legacy of bhakti poet Mirabai. Martin traces European scholars' first encounters with this powerful bhakti saint, discussing how she was invoked as a model of women's education and spirituality and sometimes compared to Greek and Roman women from the past as well as to Christian mystics like Teresa of Avila. This chapter also examines how biographies and collections have constructed Mira's persona as singular when, in fact, it is multiple and, therefore, not accessible in the way that some other women mystics' identities are; authenticity in Mira's case is itself a construct. This construction also has a positive side, however, for as Martin points out, Mira became an empowering figure both for marginalized communities who collectively sing her poems and for contemporary feminist scholars of comparative religion.

The final section of the volume contains two essays that consider mysticism across both space and time. Jazmin Graves reveals how Mai Misra's mystical *baraka* continues to inform the lives of Sidi women in Gujarat and connects Sufi spirituality with origins in North Africa to the everyday lives

of Muslim women of African ancestry in contemporary India. Graves explores how the shrine of Mai Misra in Gujarat has enabled Sidi women to inherit and perform Rifai spirituality in the Indian environment. Embodiment and reciprocity emerge as central to the spiritual economy of the Mai Misra shrine where gendered ritual practices mediate Islamic and Hindu lifeworlds. In this chapter, Graves encourages us to think about how Sufism has traveled across time and argues for a more relational view of the history of mysticism.

The volume's final essay is Louise Nelstrop and Pol Herrmann's "Love Knows No Bounds: Contemporary Artistic Engagement with Marguerite Porete." This essay joins a figure who is well-established within the medieval mystical canon, Marguerite Porete, with the contemporary Belgian artist Anne-Mie Van Kerchhoven (AMVK). Drawing on Hans Georg Gadamer's notion of art as play and joining this with Michael Sells' reading of Marguerite's apophasis of desire, Nelstrop and Herrmann reveal a trans-temporal connection between Marguerite and AMVK. Both rail against society, refusing the confines of gender and sexuality, and both are at times difficult to read as feminist icons. What they have further in common is their refusal to resolve tensions. Reading these thinkers together allows us to see each afresh and to focus on the apophatic rather than on experience and ineffability within comparative mysticism. Looking backward and forward in time, this comparison revalues contemporary art as a space for comparative feminist conversations and reveals the long reach of women's mystical discourse.

The volume concludes with an afterword by Liz Herbert McAvoy that focuses on perspective, temporal imbrication, and palimpsest to suggest how these collected essays challenge a traditional white, male gaze and instead invoke a "bidirectional gaze" that looks inward as well as outward. This afterword highlights the ways that these essays offer new approaches to comparison as they embrace difference alongside similarity and so offer a way for women from myriad cultures, geographies, and temporalities to enter into dialogue with each other and with their readers today.

Note

1 While we often use the terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism" for the sake of ease in this volume, it is important to note that this is a later term used to describe a range of distinct religious traditions in the Indian Subcontinent.

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Part I

Mysticism as Resistance

Mysticism often emerges in times of crisis and has allied itself to different forms of political resistance. Nowhere is the relation between mysticism and revolt as explicit as it is in relation to questions of gender. Even though scholars have paid attention to the relations between mysticism and revolt, this section traces the gendered history of resistance in the everyday worlds of female mystics from Europe and India. We have in this section three chapters that draw our attention to the challenge mystical discourse by women posed to established theological or political orders. Ayoush Lazikani turns to the powerful phenomenon of weeping ("tear language") in Islamic and Christian contemplative hagiography as a mode of passive resistance (Zieman also draws our attention to the force of "weeping" in the mystical life of Margery Kempe). Lazikani puts the biographies of Sufi women by al-Sulami and Ibn al-Jawzi in conversation with the biographies of beguine mystics by Jacques de Vitry. Weeping, even if ritualized, disrupts the patriarchal spiritual economy and is for the beguine female mystics nothing less than a pedagogy and a praxis. It is the way the tears of these saints move others to contemplation and action that reveals their subversive potential. In her chapter, Kathryn Maude takes mystical experience outside a hermetically sealed relation between the individual and the divine to explore the world of female mystics at Barking Abbey as a political community. By focusing on the eleventh-century nuns of Barking Abbey, an English women's house active from the seventh century, Maude powerfully suggests that women's mystical experience does not take place outside a communal, and political, register. This political dimension of women's mystical experience is approached by Katherine Zieman in the public scandal of the idea of mystical marriage in Mirabai and Margery Kempe. Zieman compares the spiritual journeys of Mirabai and Margery Kempe outside the domestic sphere and assesses their resistance to medieval patriarchal discourse. Zieman, in particular, focuses on the "defiant devotion" of Mirabai and Kempe, which calls for a spiritual transformation beyond conventional ideas of religious identity. She also focuses on the erotic dimensions of Kempe and Mirabai's mystical devotion and their disruptive potential. Kempe and Mirabai do not merely appropriate patriarchal authority but open up new possibilities in the lived experience of the everyday for political articulations against dominant patriarchal and caste orders.

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