

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE: ISSUES IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

**Approaching Medieval English
Anchoritic and Mystical Texts**

Edited by DEE DYAS,
VALERIE EDDEN AND ROGER ELLIS

APPROACHING MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ANCHORITIC AND MYSTICAL TEXTS

This volume seeks to explore the origins, context and content of the anchoritic and mystical texts produced in England during the Middle Ages and to examine the ways in which these texts may be studied and taught today. It foregrounds issues of context and interaction, seeking both to position medieval spiritual writings against a surprisingly wide range of contemporary contexts and to face the challenge of making these texts accessible to a wider readership. Contributions by leading international scholars in the field incorporate historical, literary and theological perspectives and offer critical approaches and background material which will inform both research and teaching.

The approaches to Middle English anchoritic and mystical texts suggested in this volume are many and varied. In this they reflect the richness and complexity of the contexts from which these writings emerged. These essays are offered as part of an ongoing exploration of aspects of medieval spirituality which provide invaluable insights into the interaction between medieval culture and belief.

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
ISSUES IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

ISSN 1740-9896

Series Editors

Dee Dyas
Helen Phillips

The volumes in this series focus on key topics in the cultures of the past and the role of religion in these cultures. Each offers a collection of new essays by leading scholars, which aim to cover the major subjects in a particular area or period, and to provide teachers, researchers and students with the best of the current thinking on the subject. They also discuss the issues involved in teaching, in an objective way, the often distant and sometimes alien concepts of the religious cultures of past centuries in a modern, secular, multi-cultural society.

Already published

1. The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England:
Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching
edited by Paul Cavill

APPROACHING MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ANCHORITIC AND MYSTICAL TEXTS

Edited by
DEE DYAS
VALERIE EDDEN
ROGER ELLIS

D. S. BREWER

© Editors and Contributors 2005

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

The right of the contributors to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published 2005
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 1 84384 049 9

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Approaching medieval English anchoritic and mystical texts / edited by Dee
Dyas, Valerie Edden, Roger Ellis.

p. cm. – (Christianity and culture, ISSN 1740-9896)

Summary: “Essays suggesting new ways of studying the crucial but sometimes
difficult range of medieval mystical material” – Provided by publisher.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-84384-049-9 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Christian literature, English (Middle) – History and criticism. 2. Christian
literature, Latin (Medieval and modern) – England – History and criticism.

3. Mysticism – England – History – Middle Ages, 600-1500. 4. Hermits –
England. 5. Christian literature, English (Middle) – Study and teaching.

6. Christian literature, Latin (Medieval and modern) – England – Study and
teaching. 7. Mysticism – England – History – Middle Ages, 600-1500 –
Study and teaching. 8. Hermits – England – Study and teaching. I. Dyas,

Dee. II. Edden, Valerie. III. Ellis, Roger, 1943 May 16- IV. Title. V. Series.

BV5077.G7A67 2005

248.2'2'09420902 – dc 22

2005004963

Disclaimer:

Some images in the printed version of this book are not available for inclusion in the eBook. To view these images, please refer to the printed version of this book.

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
General Editors' Preface	ix
List of Contributors	x
Abbreviations	xi
Introduction	xiii

PART I ANCHORITISM AND MYSTICISM: SOME CONTEXTS

1. E. A. JONES Anchorites and Hermits in Historical Context	3
2. DEE DYAS 'Wilderness is Anlich Lif of Ancre Wununge': The Wilderness and Medieval Anchoritic Spirituality	19
3. VALERIE EDDEN The Devotional Life of the Laity in the Late Middle Ages	35
4. SANTHA BHATTACHARJI Medieval Contemplation and Mystical Experience	51

PART II APPROACHES TO SCHOLARSHIP

5. DENIS RENEVEY Richard Rolle	63
6. A. C. SPEARING Language and its Limits: <i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i> and <i>Pearl</i>	75
7. THOMAS H. BESTUL Walter Hilton	87
8. LIZ HERBERT McAVOY 'And thou, to whom this Booke Shall Come': Julian of Norwich and her Audience, Past, Present and Future	101
9. BARRY WINDEATT 'I Use but Comownycacyon and Good Wordys': Teaching and <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i>	115

PART III APPROACHES TO TEACHING

10. ALEXANDRA BARRATT	
Teaching Anchoritic Texts: the Shock of the Old	131
Appendix: Ch. 14 of <i>The Rule of a Recluse</i> , from MS Bodley 423	138
11. R. S. ALLEN	
Introducing the Mystics	145
12. ROGER ELLIS	
Holy Fictions: Another Approach to the Middle English Mystics	157
13. ANN M. HUTCHISON	
Approaching Medieval Women Mystics in the Twenty-first Century	175
14. MARION GLASSCOE	
Contexts for Teaching Julian of Norwich	185
Appendix: ‘Stond wel, moder, under rode’	198

APPENDIX TEACHING TOOLS

CATHERINE INNES-PARKER	
Learning by Doing: Margery Kempe and students today	203
DEE DYAS, ROGER ELLIS, ANN M. HUTCHISON	
Useful terms for students	207
Index	211

Illustrations

The Devotional Life of the Laity in the Late Middle Ages

Waterperry Parish Church, Walter Curson and his sons. Private collection of David Griffith. Used by permission 36

Contexts for Teaching Julian of Norwich

Hereford Cathedral, The Hereford Mappa Mundi. Used by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of Hereford and the Hereford Mappa Mundi Trust 189

General Editors' Preface

This series addresses the challenge that the study of literature, history and material culture of the past often poses for modern researchers, students and teachers, because the religious assumptions of previous centuries are remote from the worldviews of contemporary people. The volumes in the series aim to provide research, discussion and critical perspectives on the role of religion and the historical inter-relationships of religion, society and culture, each focusing on a particular period or topic. They are designed primarily for those in university research, teaching and study, but their subjects and approaches are also likely to be of interest to readers and teachers more widely. Each volume offers a collection of essays by leading scholars and critics, providing an authoritative and balanced overview of the subject in the light of current research.

Central to the aims of the series is a conviction of the importance of the inter-relationship of research and teaching and the belief that the best teaching is that which is informed by the best contemporary research and thinking. The series is produced in association with the *Christianity and Culture* project, which seeks to explore how past religious culture can be studied and taught in modern multi-cultural, multi-faith, and in many respects secular, societies, in an objective and academic way. While the major part of each volume will be a sequence of specially commissioned essays, designed to provide a comprehensive survey of a topic, and addressing the issues, information and research relevant for an informed and up-to-date study of the religious culture of a past society and culture, volumes will also discuss how they can most effectively be presented, and made accessible, to students. Each book will therefore both give space specifically to consideration of methods of teaching historical religious culture, and contain essays in which teachers in higher education from a range of countries and contexts discuss issues and materials, and suggest approaches and answers.

Contributors

R. S. Allen, Queen Mary, University of London

Alexandra Barratt, University of Waikato

Thomas H. Bestul, University of Illinois at Chicago

Santha Bhattacharji, New College, Oxford

Dee Dyas, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York

Valerie Edden, University of Birmingham

Roger Ellis, formerly of the University of Cardiff

Marion Glasscoe, formerly of the University of Exeter

Liz Herbert McAvoy, University of Wales, Swansea

Ann M. Hutchison, York University and Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto

Catherine Innes-Parker, University of Prince Edward Island

E. A. Jones, University of Exeter

Denis Renevey, University of Fribourg

A. C. Spearing, University of Virginia

Barry Windeatt, Emmanuel College, Cambridge

Abbreviations

EETS	Early English Text Society
ES	Extra Series
LT	Long Text
n.s.	new series
OS	Original Series
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
ST	Short Text

Introduction

This volume has two aims: to explore the origins, context and content of the anchoritic and mystical texts produced in England during the Middle Ages, and to examine the ways in which these texts may be studied and taught today. It is a volume that foregrounds issues of context and interaction, seeking both to position medieval spiritual writings against a surprisingly wide range of contemporary contexts and also to face the challenge of making these texts accessible to a wider readership. The volume provides new scholarly and critical essays, incorporating historical, literary and theological perspectives, which are designed to inform both research and teaching.

The first four essays, comprising Part I of the book, offer background information necessary for contextualising anchoritic and mystic texts. Jones and Dyas set anchoritic writings in the context of the historical and theological development of the eremitic tradition. Jones outlines the history and practice of medieval English hermits and anchorites, and examines the way in which the anchoritic tradition intersects strikingly with the Middle English mystics; literature produced for an anchoritic milieu in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, including Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum* and *Ancrene Wisse*, was readily adapted for new religious purposes in the fourteenth and fifteenth. Dyas examines the biblical and historical origins of the wilderness motif, which crucially, and occasionally paradoxically, interacted with shifting contemporary preoccupations and thus informed and shaped the theory and practice of the anchoritic life in England.

Edden charts the spread of monastic devotional practices to the laity, which nurtured a thirst for private prayer and meditation, and surveys individual and corporate manifestations of this lay spirituality, which fuelled the demand for devotional and mystic texts and created a milieu in which some felt themselves compelled to embark on the contemplative life. Bhattacharji traces the origins, development, practice and meaning of 'contemplation', a concept frequently taken for granted, yet, as she demonstrates, rewarding closer examination.

The second part of the book comprises essays that offer new scholarly and critical approaches to five central figures of the medieval English mystical tradition: Rolle, Hilton, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. The question of methodology, and of the general usefulness of the term 'mystic', raised explicitly by Watson's 1999 essay,¹ is acknowledged by both Renevey and Bestul, and informs the practice of several others. Renevey argues for a broader evaluation of Rolle's achievements as commentator, liturgist and contemplative writer in Latin and English,

¹ Nicholas Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 539–65.

together with a deeper appreciation of the impact of his writings on late-medieval religion in England. He posits that Rolle's ability to engage a lay readership and his remarkable popularity in the Middle Ages derive in part from the way he moves easily from one genre to another (like Chaucer) and by his skill in bridging the gap between devotional and contemplative writing. In similar vein, Bestul highlights the importance of recognising connections between writers such as Hilton and their contemporaries in terms of shared concerns and literary and rhetorical techniques. Indeed Bestul suggests that the designation 'mystic' when applied to Hilton is 'especially crippling', abstracting him from the broader and 'highly contested religious environment in which he seems to have been actively engaged'.

Running through the volume is the conviction that these writers need to be approached on their own terms, insofar as that is possible. Windeatt challenges the modern categorisation of Margery Kempe's *Book* as autobiography or autohagiography and accounts of her that dismiss her as 'little more than an impressionable consumer of the contemplative product of her day'. He asks: 'What is Margery Kempe's *Book* for?' . . . 'Is it didactic?' and offers a reading of it that accepts the centrality of her conversations with Christ and his mother to her account of her inner journey, which is one in which she recounts her own learning rather than aims to teach others.

In his illuminating discussion of language and its limits in dealing with the transcendent, Spearing sets *The Cloud of Unknowing* alongside *Pearl* and explores the ways in which these largely dissimilar texts are alike in using intensely bodily language to point beyond the bodily sphere. The body is also a central issue for McAvoy who uses feminist theory, developed from the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, to argue that Julian transcends the limitations of traditional androcentric thought and writing to include within her vision the whole of humanity and the entirety of the human condition.

Part III contains essays on the interface between research and teaching by leading scholars who share and reflect on their extensive experience of teaching in a variety of contexts and evaluate the range of texts and editions available. These essays, which range across material drawn from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, confirm the underlying assumption of Part I, that the flowering of vernacular mystical texts in the late fourteenth and fifteenth century can best be understood with reference to the practices and writings out of which they grew.

Barratt reflects on the challenges of reading *Ancrene Wisse* with undergraduates and presents a persuasive argument for using Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum* as a way of approaching anchoritic spirituality. Since it provides a concise account of the anchoritic life for Aelred's sister, it can also serve as an introduction for modern readers, explaining the origins of anchoritic spirituality and giving an account of the daily lives of female anchorites. The section on meditation has the advantage of illustrating not only twelfth-century practice but providing examples of the type of meditative practice that seems to have influenced both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.

Ellis's essay provides an overview of texts and combinations of texts that have worked well in the classroom and suggests reasons why this should be the

case. He follows Barratt in suggesting a medieval text that may in itself serve as an introduction to mystical writing for modern readers: the prologue to the German Dominican's *Horologium Sapientiae*, which addresses key questions about the nature and status of mystical texts, and the role of both author and reader within such writing.

Allen and Hutchison both reflect on the need to develop appropriate courses to enable present-day students to make sense of the material. Having affirmed the necessity for providing appropriate historical context (a necessity affirmed throughout this volume), Allen outlines three courses that have enabled her to build bridges between the concerns of medieval mystical writers and those of her students. One, on visionaries and heretics, placed mystics among writers who 'inhabit[ed] the dangerous territory between orthodoxy and heresy'. The second considered women and medieval religion, affording students the opportunity to draw on their experience of gendered approaches to literature in other areas. The third used the contemporary interest in woman and the body to explore medieval mystical writing. Hutchison gives an account of the approaches she has adopted in teaching women mystics, offering a gendered approach that considers the situation of women in the Middle Ages and ways in which the mystics overcame the barriers that stood in the way of their committing their experiences to writing and the transmission of their writings in their own day and down the ages.

Glasscoe tackles what is essentially the most difficult and also the most important problem in introducing mystical writing to twenty-first-century readers, showing how she has dealt with the notion of religious experience for those brought up in a wholly secular society. She suggests perspectives that take readers via Emily Dickinson and the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* to a consideration of the heart of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation*. The volume concludes with Innes-Parker's account of an innovative way to engage students with Margery Kempe, by holding a mock heresy trial.

A recurrent theme within the book is the emphasis of the visual within mystical experience. It will come as no surprise, then, that visual art is suggested as a striking way into understanding mystical writing. Glasscoe's use of the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* to gloss Julian's text is an excellent instance of the practice; so is Spearing's use of the *Tres Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry to gloss *Pearl* and, paradoxically, the *Cloud*. Hutchison appeals to Pre-Raphaelite art for formal parallels. Edden's essay begins with a stained-glass window, which reminds us, as do Ellis's and Jones's essays, how much easier it is to talk about medieval spirituality on location.

The essays in this volume reflect the conviction that medieval mystical writing is better understood within its contexts: the anchoritic tradition (see Jones, Dyas, and Barratt) and the devotional practices of the late Middle Ages, which encouraged private meditation (see Edden, Bhattacharji). Other important contexts, often completely ignored in books on medieval mystical writers, are writings by the same author, as Renevey in particular argues, and other Middle English texts, both secular and religious. Here comparisons are invited with religious lyrics, with Chaucer, with the late fourteenth-century anonymous poem *Pearl* (see Spearing) and with Langland's *Piers Plowman*, written in three

versions during the last half of the fourteenth century, and also with the writings of the Wycliffites (Lollards) in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century.

It is also important to avoid insularity. Continental mystical texts circulated widely in England; many were translated into English. While the emphasis of this book is on England, foreign texts figure repeatedly and must be considered as playing a vital role in the life of the English mystics: the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, a sixth-century Syrian monk confused with Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17: 13–34); the writings of Anselm of Bec (1033–1109), archbishop of Canterbury from 1098; the *Itinerarium mentis Dei* of the Franciscan Bonaventure (c.1217–74), an Italian; the *Mirror of Simple Souls* of Margaret (Marguerite) Porete (d.1310), a French woman; the *Liber de vere fidelium experientia* of the Italian Angela of Foligno (1248–1309); the *Liber Celestis* of Bridget (Birgitta) of Sweden (1303–73), especially, as Windeatt notes, ‘the *idea* of St Bridget’ (p. 118); the Franciscan Pseudo-Bonaventure’s *Meditations Vitae Christi*, translated into English by Nicholas Love in 1410; and the *De discretione spirituum* of Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris.

The approaches to Middle English anchoritic and mystical texts suggested in this volume are many and varied. In this they reflect the richness and complexity of the contexts from which these writings emerged. These essays are offered as part of an ongoing exploration of aspects of medieval spirituality which, while posing a considerable challenge to modern readers, also offer invaluable insights into the interaction between medieval culture and belief.

Part I

Anchoritism and Mysticism: Some Contexts

Hermits and Anchorites in Historical Context

E. A. JONES

ON a hot midsummer Friday on the road from York to Bridlington, probably in 1413, John Kempe finally acceded to his wife Margery's desire to live a life of chastity.¹ Then, Margery's *Book* continues, 'went thei forth to-Brydlyngton-ward and also to many other contres and spokyn wyth Goddys servawntys, bothen ankrys and reclusys and many other of owyr Lordys loverys, wyth many worthy clerkys, doctorys of dyvynyte, and bachelers also, in many dyvers placys' (I.11; 793–7). It was probably on this visit that she first met the anchoress of York (one of several in the city at this date), who on a subsequent occasion would snub her, on account of the reputation she had acquired in the interim (I.50). The male anchorite of the Chapel-in-the-Fields, Norwich, had similarly distanced himself from her as her notoriety increased, but she visited him all the same (I.43). More faithful was her divinely appointed confessor and resolute supporter, the anchorite at the house of Dominican friars in Lynn (I.5).² Reynold, a hermit of the same town, accompanied her on journeys to Ipswich, Walsingham and Norwich and, after a chance meeting at Syon Abbey, and a certain amount of persuasion, on the return to Lynn (II.1,10). Of all the encounters with solitaries had by this indefatigable seeker-out of 'ankrys and reclusys', however, her visit to Julian of Norwich seems to have made the greatest impression. There she gave an account of her experiences and visions, and received encouragement and counsel, enjoying much 'holy dalyawns' during the 'many days that thei were togedyr' (I.18; 1379–81).

For all her dealings with solitaries, however, and notwithstanding the early printer Henry Pepwell's description of her as 'a deuoute ancre', Margery Kempe never seems to have sought enclosure as an anchorite.³ But all of the other authors comprising the canon of the 'Middle English Mystics' were closely associated with the solitary vocations, either as practitioners themselves or in composing works for an anchoritic or eremitic audience. Julian of Norwich was of course an anchorite although, to judge from the details given in the Short

¹ Book I, ch. 11 in Barry Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harlow, 2000; repr. Cambridge, 2004), lines 708–99 (pp. 86–90). All quotations from the *Book* will be taken from this edition and line numbers given. To facilitate reference to other editions, book and chapter numbers will also be given for these and other more general references to the *Book*.

² Further references to him are collected and discussed by Windeatt, ed. cit., notes to lines 528–30, pp. 73–4.

³ See *ibid.*, p. 434 (textual note to line 167), and p. 1.

Text of her *Revelations*, not at the time when she had her visions.⁴ Richard Rolle seems already to have been in the Middle Ages England's best-known hermit.⁵ In addition, his English epistle *The Form of Living* was written for the anchoress Margaret de Kirkby, enclosed at East Layton (North Yorkshire), and offered detailed guidance for many aspects of her material and spiritual existence.⁶ In 1435 his most popular Latin work, the *Incendium Amoris*, was translated into English as *The Fire of Love* by the Carmelite friar Richard Misyn for Margaret Heslyngton, anchoress at the church of St Margaret, York.⁷ The first book of Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* is addressed specifically to an anchoress, although it is clear that, almost from the first, Hilton envisaged the extension of the work's readership to include the more general audience for whom *Scale II* is intended. His Latin epistle *On the Image of Sin (De Imagine Peccati)* is also addressed to a solitary, and from this (most likely his earliest extant work) and another early letter it is clear that Hilton himself spent some time living the solitary life between his leaving Cambridge and joining the Augustinian canons at Thurgarton.⁸ Although we know nothing certain of the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, his *A Pistle of Discrecioun of Stirings* is designed as counsel for one struggling with a call to the solitary life, while the *Cloud* itself (and, by extension, *The Book of Privy Counselling*) is expressly directed to a disciple pursuing a 'solitari forme & maner of leuyng'.⁹

Hermits and anchorites were, then, a feature of the spiritual landscape of late-medieval England as well as of its topography, and claim the attention of the student of the Middle English mystics as they did of a medieval pilgrim like Margery Kempe. This essay seeks first to present a sketch of the development of the solitary lives in medieval England – to answer, with in due course an

⁴ See Short Text, ch. ii (in E. Colledge and J. Walsh, eds, *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts 35 (2 vols, Toronto, 1978), pp. 207–9), for the presence of others in Julian's sickroom, and her anointing by the curate – neither of which would be usual for an anchoress, and ch. ix (ed. cit., p. 234) for the visit of her mother. Although Julian had her revelations in 1373, the first documentary reference to her as an anchoress does not occur until 1394. See Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370–1532*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts 66 (Toronto, 1984), p. 200 n. 29.

⁵ As witnessed, in their different ways, by the *Officium* prepared at Hampole in the hope of his canonisation (translated by Hope Emily Allen in *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle . . . and Materials for his Biography*, Modern Language Association of America Monographs Series III (New York, 1927), pp. 55–61), by the words of caution expressed by the *Cloud*-author and Hilton, and by the defence of Rolle written by the hermit Thomas Basset. For a summary of these latter, see Michael Sargent, 'Contemporary Criticism of Richard Rolle', in *Kartäusermystik und -mystiker*, ed. James Hogg, 4 vols, Analecta Cartusiana lv (1981), i.160–205.

⁶ Rolle also mentions, in his commentary *Super Lectiones Mortuorum*, his *Libellus de Vita Heremitarum*. This may be a lost work or, as Nicholas Watson suggests, Rolle may mean his *Incendium Amoris*. See *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 305 n. 21; for the quotation from *Super Lectiones Mortuorum*, see pp. 206–7.

⁷ See *The Fire of Love, and The Mending of Life or The Rule of Living*, ed. Ralph Harvey, EETS OS 106 (London, 1896), p. 104. For Margaret Heslyngton see Angelo Raine, *Mediaeval York: A topographical survey based on original sources* (London, 1955), p. 108. See also the work being currently done on Misyn by Johan Bergstrom-Allen.

⁸ See John P. H. Clark and Cheryl Taylor, trans, *Walter Hilton's Latin Writings*, Analecta Cartusiana cxxiv (1987), i.69, 103–4.

⁹ Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises* (Exeter, 1982), p. 8, lines 15–16 (*Cloud*, ch. 1). Hodgson's observation that the author 'appears to live as a recluse' (p. x) seems to me a considerable over-reading of the passage she cites in its support.

emphasis on the anchoritic vocation that principally concerns us here, basic questions such as ‘what?’, ‘who?’, ‘where?’, ‘when?’ and ‘how?’ – before turning in its last part to perhaps the most insistent and intractable question for the modern observer: ‘why?’

Hermits in the Early Middle Ages

When the desert ideal migrated to the West, would-be hermits were quick to find equivalents for the Eastern desert in the wildernesses of their own more temperate climate: forests, fens and the expanse of the ocean.¹⁰ The latter was particularly associated with Celtic Christianity, in which the eremitic component was strong, and is witnessed in the early practice of seeking ‘a desert in the ocean’, and subsequently in the large number of hermitages founded on islands off the west coast of Ireland.¹¹ Celtic influence figures largely in the lives of early English hermits, who are also most commonly found at island sites.¹² The Irishman St Aidan (d.651), apostle of Northumbria and first abbot and bishop of Lindisfarne, early Anglo-Saxon England’s greatest monastery, was accustomed to spend Lent living in seclusion as a hermit on the island of Inner Farne. His successor at Lindisfarne, St Cuthbert (c.634–87) lived the hermit-life on the island now known as St Cuthbert’s Isle, and later withdrew, as Aidan had done, to the Inner Farne. After his death he was succeeded as hermit there by Æthelwald, and at around the same time an ornate metal case was made for the Lindisfarne Gospels by the anchorite Billfrith. Cuthbert’s friend and contemporary (they died on the same day), St Herbert, lived on an inland island on Derwentwater (Cumbria).

The Celtic brand of eremitic monasticism which was influential in early Northumbria was, however, gradually losing out during this period to the Benedictine model favoured by Rome. For St Benedict (c.480–c.550), eremitic withdrawal was no longer the first step towards the monastic life, but its culmination and extension, to be attempted only by those few who were sufficiently well qualified. He speaks of

the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are

¹⁰ See the essay in this volume by Dyas, pp. 29–30.

¹¹ Michael Herity, ‘Early Irish Hermitages in the Light of the *Lives* of Cuthbert’, in *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 45–63.

¹² For what follows here I have found useful Mary Clayton, ‘Hermits and the Contemplative Life in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English prose saints’ lives and their contexts*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, 1996), pp. 147–75. My thanks to Peter Jackson for this reference. Summaries of the lives of the saints I use here and later in the essay will be found, together with further bibliography, in David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1987).

ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.¹³

This model was followed by St Guthlac (c.673–714), a successful soldier who at the age of twenty-four gave up his former life to enter the monastery of Repton (Derbyshire).¹⁴ After four years of communal life, Guthlac was inspired by the model of the Desert Fathers to seek out a desert of his own. Accordingly he made his way into the fens, 'a very long tract, now consisting of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog, sometimes studded with wooded islands and traversed by the windings of tortuous streams' (p. 87). Unsatisfied even by this desert place, Guthlac learned of a remote island deep within it, where 'No settler had been able to dwell alone . . . on account of the phantoms of demons which haunted it' (p. 89). And here, at Crowland (Lincolnshire), Guthlac resolved to live as a hermit.

In addition to describing the fens repeatedly as *heremum*, or the desert, Guthlac's biographer, the monk Felix, includes many reminiscences of earlier hermits' lives, notably Bede's life of St Cuthbert, and Athanasius's of St Antony, in what follows. Episodes such as terrifying diabolical temptations, and the miraculous ministrations of wild birds and beasts, might have been drawn (and perhaps were drawn) from the experiences of Antony himself. By such strategies, Felix is able to establish his subject as a true heir to the desert tradition.

The New Hermits

The model of Antony and the other Desert Fathers was also invoked by a new movement of monastic hermits in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but this time in order to challenge established Benedictine monasticism.¹⁵ The movement began with St Romuald (c.950–1027), a monk at the Cluniac Benedictine monastery of S. Apollinare-in-Classe, near Ravenna.¹⁶ His extensive study of the works of the Desert Fathers, combined with an exasperation that his fellow monks did not keep the Rule of St Benedict with the strictness he expected, persuaded him to reject the elaborate institutions and liturgical practices of the Cluniac observance and to seek greater solitude and asceticism as a hermit. For Romuald, however, the eremitic ideal was to inform not only his own 'single combat of the desert', but the reform of monasticism. He was joined by similarly minded companions who banded together into communities of hermits, which stressed the eremitic qualities of austerity, asceticism and withdrawal above total solitude. After his death, Romuald's foundation at Camaldoli became the centre of a new order of hermit-monks (the still extant

¹³ Timothy Fry et al., eds, *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN, 1981), ch. 1, lines 3–5, pp. 168–9.

¹⁴ The following two paragraphs are based on *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956). Page numbers to this edition will henceforth be given in the text. The memorable Old English poems on his life have been edited by Jane Roberts, *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford, 1979).

¹⁵ This movement has been studied by Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism* (London, 1984), to which the rest of this section is extensively indebted.

¹⁶ For an outline of Romuald's career, see *ibid.*, pp. 29–32.

Camaldolese). This process of hermit-inspired reform was reproduced throughout Europe, and was the origin of the great orders of high-medieval monasticism – the Cistercians, Premonstratensians and Carthusians – as well as many smaller, shorter-lived congregations.

Similar narratives survive from England.¹⁷ In early 1132, a delegation of Cistercian monks from St Bernard's monastery of Clairvaux passed through York on their way to Rievaulx Abbey. There they came to the attention of the monks of St Mary's, the richest Benedictine abbey in the North of England. Their example prompted a number of the monks of St Mary's to re-examine their own way of life, and to begin a campaign for reform of the house on stricter lines. After six months of dissension, the two parties met in the presence of Thurstan, archbishop of York. A riot ensued, and the reforming party of monks was expelled from St Mary's. At the end of 1132, Thurstan established the monks on a suitably eremitic site, 'fit rather to be the lair of wild beasts than the home of human beings', near Ripon, which became Fountains Abbey, daughter house to Clairvaux, and one of the great Cistercian monasteries in England.

This phase of eremitic history came to an end in 1215, when the Fourth Lateran Council placed a ban on the foundation of any new religious orders. Most of the orders created during the movement quite quickly lost their original eremitic character – victims of their own success in attracting recruits and donations. Few visitors to the remains of Fountains Abbey (National Trust) today would recognise in their scale and splendour either the inhospitable wilderness described by the early monks, or the humble austerity of the desert ideal. A sense of the latter may still, however, be had from the ruins of England's best-preserved Carthusian monastery at Mount Grace (North Yorkshire, English Heritage and National Trust), where the restored and recreated cell conveys something of the quiet solitude of the Carthusian life. The Carthusians have a double claim on our interest. They are also our most valuable preservers and transmitters of the works of the medieval mystics.¹⁸

Anchorites

As we have seen, St Benedict uses the terms 'hermit' and 'anchorite' synonymously, and this usage is general in the West until around the end of the first millennium. Thereafter a process begins in which the two terms are applied more or less unambiguously to two increasingly clearly demarcated forms of the solitary life. 'Hermit' continues to be used of one who retires to the 'desert'

¹⁷ For the story retold here, see L. G. D. Baker, 'The Foundation of Fountains Abbey', *Northern History* iv (1969), pp. 29–43. For context, see Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain 1000–1300* (Cambridge, 1994), ch. 4.

¹⁸ For this aspect of Carthusian activity, see M. G. Sargent, 'The Transmission by the English Carthusians of Some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* xxvii (1976), pp. 225–40, and A. I. Doyle, 'Carthusian Participation in the Movement of Works of Richard Rolle. Between England and Other Parts of Europe in the 14th and 15th Centuries', in Hogg, *Kartäusermystik und -mystiker*, ii. 109–20.