Though trinitarian theology has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the last few years, there is a lamentable lacuna in much of this study, a gap between intellectual rigor and concrete experience. While the contributions of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas are important to any foundational study of the Trinity, a strictly philosophical and scholastic approach has proved to be both contentious and problematic. As a result, many are left wanting for more meaningful expressions of this profound mystery. Anne Hunt fills this lacuna and offers a fresh avenue of reflection. She explores the distinctly trinitarian insights of a number of Christian mystics—Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart, Bonaventure and Elizabeth of the Trinity, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, William of St. Thierry and Julian of Norwich. Readers will find that the mystery of the divine life and love that was so tangibly given and so palpably experienced by these mystics is now offered to us through them.

Anne Hunt is faculty dean of theology and philosophy at Australian Catholic University. She is currently vice president of the Australian Catholic Theological Association. She is author of Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith, What Are They Saying About the Trinity? and The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery.

“With unusual insight and clarity, Anne Hunt has shown how central to Christian life the experience and worship of the Trinity should be by appropriating for contemporary spirituality and theology the extraordinary Trinitarian consciousness of eight mystical titans.”

Harvey D Egan, SJ
Professor of Systematic and Mystical Theology
Boston College

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“This new book from Anne Hunt is one that we have long needed, not only in theology, but also in the wider Christian community. An obvious gap in the current renewal of the theology of the Trinity has been that we have yet to retrieve the rich insights of the Christian mystics. Anne Hunt brings eight great mystical writers to life, and leads us into a deep appreciation of their experience and understanding of the triune God. This is a beautiful book, well-structured, well-written, abounding in insights, and accessible, a book that draws the reader to wonder and to prayer.”

— Denis Edwards  
Professor of Theology  
Flinders University, Australia  
Author of Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit

“With unusual insight and clarity, Anne Hunt has shown how central to Christian life the experience and worship of the Trinity should be by appropriating for contemporary spirituality and theology the extraordinary Trinitarian consciousness of eight mystical titans.”

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“A feature of post-conciliar theology has been the recovery of the centrality of the Blessed Trinity both for the daily life of believers and for theology. A major contributor to this development is the eminent Australian theologian, Anne Hunt. In books such as Trinity (2005) Professor Hunt communicates the riches of contemporary Trinitarian theology, while in a volume such as The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery (1997) she connects the Trinity and the Cross, communicating the thought of the principal authors in the field and then proposing further possible developments. Now in this new volume she presents the experience of the Blessed Trinity on the part of eight mystics of the second millennium—William of St. Thierry, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich and Blessed Elizabeth of Dijon. Her goal is ‘to probe through their witness to the mystery of the Trinity,’ convinced that they offer ‘rich seams of data for systematic theology.’ She notes that they would all want us to reflect on the Trinity as the eternal event of love by which believers are welcomed into the very midst of the Eternal Three, attaining an entry into the Trinitarian relations. This work—each chapter a fascinating portrait of both the life and the Trinitarian experience of a particular mystic—presents ‘new ways of knowing the Trinity.’ Professor Hunt has enriched again the theology of the Trinity.”

— Thomas J. Norris  
Professor in Systematic Theology  
Maynooth, Ireland
THE TRINITY
INSIGHTS FROM THE MYSTICS

Anne Hunt

2010
Contents

Introduction vii
Chapter 1: William of St. Thierry (ca. 1080–1148) 1
Chapter 2: Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) 23
Chapter 3: Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274) 48
Chapter 4: Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328) 73
Chapter 5: Julian of Norwich (1342/3–ca. 1416) 98
Chapter 6: Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) 122
Chapter 7: John of the Cross (1542–1591) 144
Chapter 8: Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880–1906) 168
Conclusion 182
Index of Names 188
The mystery of God as Trinity stands at the center of the Christian faith. The radically trinitarian shape of the church’s faith has its origins in the post-Easter consciousness of Jesus’ disciples. Through their experience of the paschal mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection, their perception of the mystery of God was profoundly reshaped. They came to understand, however strange it seemed to their Jewish monotheistic faith, that the unity of God implies a divine *communion* of life and love. Thus it was that the Christian conviction that God is somehow both Three and One emerged. It took root in the prayer and liturgy of the early Christian community. In the following centuries, it led to the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.  

Throughout the two millennia since those heady days of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, the best and brightest of Christian minds have struggled to express the mystery in a coherent and plausible way. In their efforts, they have most often looked for analogies for this Three-in-Oneness with things known in the natural world, the world of our everyday experience. St. Patrick took the example of the shamrock. St. Augustine of Hippo took the human mind and its activities or faculties of memory, understanding, and love. Richard of St. Victor took the example of interpersonal love to demonstrate that God is necessarily threefold in divine

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personhood, for, Richard argued, the perfection of interpersonal love requires not just two coequals who love each other, but their shared love for a third coequal. An understanding of the mystery was also advanced, albeit less frequently, by an exploration of the interconnection of the mystery of the Trinity with other mysteries of Christian faith, for example, with grace or with the Eucharist. Philosophical resources were also brought to bear in explicating the mystery, a strategy that reached its brilliant apogee in the highly refined and metaphysically elegant theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and his masterful appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy. Throughout the centuries, theology sought in these ways to further faith’s understanding of this most sublime and ineffable mystery.

Meanwhile, at various times in the history of Christianity, in the Eastern as well as the Western tradition, there are mystics who, in their profound encounters with God, have gleaned distinctly trinitarian insights. Of course, in all Christian mysticism, by virtue of the Christian faith from which it issues, God is necessarily trinitarian. But for some mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross, their consciousness of God as Trinity is heightened to a more intense and explicit degree in and through their mystical encounters.

As is right and fitting, theology recognizes the beauty and the drama of the mysteries of faith unfolding in the very lives as well as the testimonies of the mystics. What is rather remarkable, however, is that in fact theology, in its task of faith seeking understanding, has paid little systematic attention to the insights offered by the mystics. Theology, by and large, has not probed Christian mysticism as a rich seam of data for the understanding of Christian faith. Yet surely, if theology is to be true to itself, it must attend to the actual witness of the mystics and the intense consciousness of the mysteries that they manifest.2

Not a few theologians, including the great Karl Rahner, SJ, have bemoaned the divide between mystical consciousness and doctrinal theology. Rahner, for example, speaks of bridging “the rift” between “lived piety and abstract theology,” and of “how religious experiences of a spiritual or mystical kind can overflow and be transposed into the idiom of theological reflection.”3 More recently, then-president of the Catholic Theological

Society of America, theologian Michael J. Buckley, SJ, also posed the question: “Is it not extraordinary that so much Catholic formal theology for centuries . . . has bracketed this actual witness [the spiritual experiences of the saints/mystics] as of no cogency. . . ? Is it not a lacuna in the standard theology, even of our day, that theology neither has nor has striven to forge the intellectual devices to probe in these concrete experiences the warrant they present for the reality of God and make them available for so universal a discipline?”

Buckley, like Rahner, challenges theologians to find in the consciousness and insights of the mystics a *locus theologicus*, a source and a resource for theological reflection on the mysteries of Christian faith.

The aim of this book is to take up that challenge and at least to examine a number of mystics who have had what could be described as distinctly trinitarian insights. Our goal is to probe, through their witness, the mystery of the Trinity, and so to deepen faith’s understanding of the mystery. Such an approach has the advantage of avoiding the philosophical issues that have proved so problematic in trinitarian theology in recent times, such as the relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity, or the relative virtues of the psychological analogy compared to, say, the social model in explicating the mystery. Instead, the mystics offer not an explication of the mystery per se but rather, as near as possible in this world, a rendering of an unmediated experience of the Trinity. What is also interesting is that, whereas women are by and large eclipsed in the classical theological tradition of Christianity, their voices deemed to have very limited authority, they figure just as strongly as the men in the tradition of Christian mysticism. Indeed women mystics are apparently more numerous than their male counterparts, certainly in the Middle Ages.


5. Bernard McGinn recounts that the scholastic theologian Henry of Ghent, around 1290, in his *Summae Quaestionum Ordinarium*, Art XI, quaest. 11, ff 77v–78r, addressed the question: “Whether a woman can be a doctor of theology?” Henry argued that women cannot be doctors of theology because (ex officio) they cannot have the four public marks required for doctoral status: constancy, efficacy, authority, and effect. Henry added a further note, however: “Speaking about teaching from divine favour (ex beneficio) and the fervour of charity, it is well allowed for a woman to teach just like anyone else, if she possesses sound doctrine. But this should be done privately and in silence, not in public and before the church” (and, moreover only to other women and girls, not to men as it might incite lust). See McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 1.
the tradition of Christian mysticism, their voices are by no means silenced. Moreover, women’s mystical insights are particularly noteworthy, given that most of them did not have access to the education and scholarly training that was granted to their male contemporaries.

Methodological and Hermeneutical Issues

Given the necessarily limited scope of the project, we have chosen William of St. Thierry (ca. 1080–1148), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274), Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328), Julian of Norwich (1342/3–ca. 1416), Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), John of the Cross (1542–1591), and Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880–1906) for this study. We hope that a further study will include mystics from the early Christian centuries and also mystics from the Christian tradition of the East.

Of our chosen mystics, all are continental or English. All belong to the Western tradition of Christianity. Four are women, four men. Most are monastic in their formation, some scholastic; one is an anchorite. They range from the eleventh century (William of St. Thierry) to the twentieth century (Elizabeth of the Trinity). Some lived in that richly creative period, the Middle Ages (1100–1450), but by no means all. Some are visionaries, some not; some indeed have little interest in visions or ecstasies. Some are teachers and preachers, some prophets, some poets, some artists indeed. All of them are relatively well known, with the exception of William of St. Thierry who is included because of the significant role he played in the development of trinitarian devotion in the Cistercian tradition, albeit his writings were mistakenly ascribed to his friend Bernard of Clairvaux for some centuries. What unites our chosen mystics is that each offers penetrating insights into the mystery of the Trinity and the soul’s mystical union with it. Each communicates a distinctly trinitarian encounter with God and invites others to enter into the mystery of God who is Trinity.

The men—William of St. Thierry, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross—are all well educated, trained in Latin, the Sacred Scriptures, and theology. William and John belong to the monastic tradition. Bonaventure belongs to the newly founded Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans). Meister Eckhart of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) is the brilliant Master of Paris, master of scholastic theology and meister of the spiritual life. None of the women—Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, and Elizabeth of the Trinity—had the privilege of the high level of education in theology and Scripture that was given to their male contemporaries. Admittedly, Julian is clearly well educated in Latin and well
read in the spiritual classics, and Hildegard has at least working knowledge of Latin but, nevertheless, neither has training in theology as such. Julian, Teresa, and Elizabeth write in the vernacular, while Hildegard, with the assistance of her secretary-scribe, writes in Latin. Three of the women have remarkable visionary experiences, particularly Julian and Hildegard. Their visions, together with the claim that their writings are divinely inspired, give their teachings an authority otherwise not granted—indeed not permitted—to them as women.

They write for a variety of reasons—some for teaching on prayer and contemplative practice, others for exhortation, others for more classically theological purposes, but rarely for precise elucidation of the mystery of the Trinity. Consequently, their writings show a variety of forms of mystical discourse, ranging from scholastic treatises and biblical commentaries, through accounts and interpretations of their visions, to sermons and letters and poems. All call for a rather different kind of reading and comprehending, for more of a kind of *lectio divina*, a rumination, a meditation, rather than a linear analytic examination of a text, not that such a method is totally excluded. Hildegard’s writings also include a remarkable series of intricately detailed illuminations, which are by no means mere illustrations of or a supplement to the written text, but integral to her theology. Indeed, for Hildegard, the two forms of communication are inextricably connected; her theology is as much visual as it is verbal.

Together, our chosen mystics exemplify different styles of theology, which can be broadly classified as monastic, scholastic, and vernacular. On the one hand, monastic theology strives for an understanding of the mysteries of faith that is the fruit of prayer, liturgy, and contemplation. Focused on interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, it is basically exegetical in method. Its goal is experience, contemplation: believe in order to experience. Its most common genres are the biblical commentary, the letter-treatise, and the written rhetorical sermon. Scholastic theology, on the other hand, is the fruit of the more explicitly scholarly endeavor of faith seeking understanding. It took root in the universities, which emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and flourished with the advent of Aristotelian philosophy into Europe in the thirteenth century. Its goal is knowledge, understanding, rationality, the demonstration of the reasonableness of Christian faith: believe in order to understand. Its typical genres are *lectio, disputatio, quaestio*, and *summa*. Vernacular theology also surfaced with considerable vigor in the twelfth century, not from the academic schools of the professional theologians, but more often from those who were barred from entry to university. It flourished not among the scholarly
trained—though there were some exceptions, such as the erudite Master of Paris, Meister Eckhart, who championed it—but among devout souls, formed by prayer and contemplation and informed by a wide reading of the spiritual classics available to them in the vernacular. Women, such as Julian of Norwich, played a particularly significant role in the development of this style of theology. More fluid in style and content, and technically less precise, vernacular theology is not as easily characterized as the monastic and scholastic. It includes visionary experiences and their explanation, hagiography, and poetry.

Clearly, the experiences and the insights of the mystics into the mystery of the Trinity do not come out of nowhere. Each of the mystics—along with the rest of us—is influenced and limited by the creedal statements as well as the images and concepts of God that prevail in his or her milieu and time. Our chosen mystics come to their profound consciousness of the mystery with a strong faith in and conception of it, as intimated in the New Testament and as defined by the church in its creeds and doctrines. They also come with knowledge, in varying depth, of Augustine’s exploration of the mystery of the Trinity in terms of what is now called the psychological analogy, wherein the mystery is understood in terms of the human mind’s operations or faculties. There is, then, no doubting that their revelations and insights are grounded in a prior familiarity with doctrinal formulations as well as iconographic and theological expressions of the mystery. The influence of trinitarian iconography is evident to varying degrees. Teresa and Elizabeth, for example, make reference to particular visual images of the Trinity.

It is hardly surprising that a flourishing of trinitarian mysticism would coincide with a period of sustained attention to matters trinitarian, such as occurred in the centuries following the split between East and West in the eleventh century over the procession of the Holy Spirit. Both the Fourth Lateran General Council in 1215 and the Second General Council of Lyons in 1274 attempted reunion and affirmed the *filioque.* 6 The Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438 and 1439 made another attempt at reunion and reiterated the double procession of the Spirit as well as affirming the legitimacy of its insertion into the Creed for the sake of clarity. 7 The feast

7. DS 1300–1302.
of the Trinity, which is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost, was eventually proclaimed for inclusion in the Roman Church calendar in 1334. At the same time, the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a remarkable flourishing of trinitarian devotion and trinitarian iconography. The Gnadenstuhl iconographic form (Throne of Mercy or Seat of Grace as it is often known), which combines representation of the mystery of the Three with the crucifixion of Christ, proved especially popular at this time. The explosion of images for private devotion that occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries prompted another flourishing of trinitarian iconography, also witnessing to the interconnection between mysticism and the visual arts.⁸

Some Practicalities and Limitations

We have arranged our studies of the chosen mystics in chronological order, though they can be approached in any order. We have also tried not to rely too greatly on a prior knowledge of the tradition of trinitarian theology. We have sought to give sufficient background about the mystics’ lives and times to assist the reader in better appreciating the particular insights of each. Each mystic, after all, is grounded in a particular time and place and their context shapes the theological and doctrinal insights that they offer to us. Admittedly, there is the question as to whether a biography is even possible in many cases, with sources tainted and the biographical records, such as they are, often written in the style of hagiography.

In each chapter, then, we have first provided a brief overview of the mystic’s life and times, his or her writings, and, to the degree that is possible, the mystical experience or, better, the mystical consciousness on which those writings are based before moving to an exploration of the insights into the mystery of the Trinity that the mystic offers. Our task is to plumb the writings of mystics, not just for their spiritual richness, but for their distinctly theological and doctrinal insights. We have kept footnotes to a minimum and, at each chapter’s end, we have provided further sources, both primary and secondary, as well as recommended readings for those readers who wish to pursue the subject more deeply. We have included numerous quotations in the studies, in order to allow the mystics’

own voices to be heard as much as practicable. Throughout, our primary focus is the distinctly doctrinal nature and caliber of their insights into the mystery of the Trinity.

We shall not, in this study, enter into the discussion of the complex issues concerning the phenomenon of mysticism itself. We shall instead adopt Bernard McGinn’s notion of mysticism as a special consciousness of God and the ensuing transformation of person that results from immediate or direct encounter with God. We recognize that this immediately and intensely personal encounter with the transcendent reality of God, by its very nature, defies conventional modes of expression, and hence the mystics’ strong use of metaphors and figures of speech and the metaphoric complexity and lyrical quality of their mystical writings. We recognize too that a probing of the mystics’ writings is consequently more akin to a contemplative lectio divina than scholarly exegesis, a rumination rather than a linear analysis. As McGinn explains, comparing their use of language to poetry: “Mystical masterpieces . . . are often close to poetry in the ways in which they concentrate and alter language to achieve their ends . . . [and use] verbal strategies in which language is used not so much informationally as transformationally, that is, not to convey a content but to assist the hearer or reader to hope for or to achieve the same consciousness.”

In his discussions of mysticism, McGinn highlights the problems associated with the use of the word experience and opts instead for the word consciousness, for consciousness, he argues, expresses the reality that “mysticism (as the mystics insisted) is more than a matter of unusual sensations, but essentially comprises new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of life.” The particular focus of our probing of the mystics is the new ways of knowing the Trinity that emerge from their heightened consciousnesses of the mystery. It is those new ways of knowing the Trinity that we offer to our readers, that they too will come to a new and deeper understanding of this great mystery. Our hope is that the study will be of assistance to students of trinitarian theology as well as to the interested lay reader in deepening an understanding and appreciation of the mystery of the Trinity.


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In conclusion, I wish to express an enormous debt of gratitude to the many writers and commentators on the mystics whose studies have made this study possible. This contribution, by way of synthesis and perspective, would be impossible were it not for the many superb specialist studies already undertaken by many fine scholars in the field. Theirs is the groundwork on which this contribution humbly stands. In particular, I salute Professor Bernard McGinn for the magisterial and monumental contribution which he has made to the study of the Christian mystical tradition.

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Trinity Sunday 2009