
Liam Peter Temple’s masterful *Mysticism in Early Modern England* explores how mysticism featured in polemical and religious discourse in seventeenth-century England. Mysticism, according to Temple, was viewed as a source of sectarianism, radicalism, and, most significantly, religious enthusiasm. Both Protestant and Catholic mysticism was increasingly criticized as enthusiastic, with critics drawing on prevalent medical theories to discredit mystical experience as both irrational and melancholic. Temple traces how, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, mysticism was discredited by thinkers like John Locke as part of an early enlightenment emphasis on rationality, natural religion, and courtesy. In exploring this significant change in attitudes towards mysticism, this study advocates that modern scholarly attempts to “return” mysticism to mainstream histories of religion have origins in this rejection of mysticism in the seventeenth century.

Temple opens his work by carefully mapping the modern understanding of mysticism and its connections to experimentalism. The decline of Enlightenment values following the French Revolution and the attacks of Romanticism on rationality revived mysticism in the mid-nineteenth century. In this romantic re-envisioning, mysticism became “a global species of religious experience with innumerable subspecies, historical, geographic, and national” (6). Mysticism became a perennial phenomenon, a type of experience present at all times and in all religions. This interpretation would shape accounts written in the following century, as scholars sought to integrate mysticism into religious institutions. In highlighting the arguments set forth by Anglican Priest William Ralph Inge, Anglo-Catholic writer Evelyn Underhill, and psychologist William James, Temple provides a dynamic backdrop to his study. He asserts that such a framework is vital as the "narrative at the core of this book, the rejection of mysticism in the seventeenth century, is vital for understanding this complex change in how mysticism has been understood" (7). Furthermore, the author contends that our understanding of mysticism has primarily remained within the confines set by critics in the seventeenth century:
experiential, private, and mostly outside of institutional religion. With this, he traces the lingering disagreements regarding the meaning of mysticism by surveying the scholarly works by Steven T. Katz, R. C. Zachner, W. T. Stace, Ninian Smart, Hans H. Penner, and others.

He is vigilant to state, however, that scholars engaged in this postmodern endeavor to produce constructivist histories of mysticism did so concurrently with one other significant historiographical development. Temple heeds the cautions of the Cambridge School of Intellectual History, based on the scholarship of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock, who developed a framework for a similar rejection of perennialism in historical study. Skinner rebuffed the claim that any text is self-sufficient, or that it contains timeless elements or dateless wisdom of universal application. To alienate the text from its context ran the risk of applying our expectations to the text. Thus, the study of a religious idea is marred by the “unconscious application of paradigms whose familiarity to the historian disguises an essential inapplicability to the past” (9). Temple cautions that we also need to avoid the snares of scholarship, which defined mysticism as a timeless concept. He tactfully outlines a plenitude of ways that mysticism has been understood throughout Christian history, proposing that mysticism, is a relative and fluid term, one which has changed as subsequent generations’ understanding of the “mystical element” of Christianity changed.

Temple begins with chapter 1, “English Benedictine Mysticism, 1605–1665,” where he explores the life and work of Catholic monk Augustine Baker’s early life and conversion to Catholicism. It argues that Baker was converted more by illicit books than illicit missionaries, using Catholic works of spirituality and mysticism available in England to ease periods of spiritual crisis. The chapter also investigates his time as a spiritual advisor to the Benedictine nuns of Cambrai, a period in which he fully refined his mystical doctrines. Temple examines this mysticism in detail, arguing that it presented numerous problems to the superiors of the Congregation on the topics of authority and spiritual guidance. It also traces Baker’s followers and detractors, revealing just how polarizing mysticism could be in a monastic environment.

In chapter 2, “Mysticism and Heterodoxy in Revolutionary England, 1625–1655,” Temple peers into a realm embroiled in politico-
religious upheaval which culminated in the beheading of King Charles I. Temple asserts that the issue of mysticism was on the mind of a broad spectrum of Protestants, from the strict Puritans of that age to the more inclined latitudinarians, were all were concerned about influence of mysticism. Arguing that mystical works should be seen as part of a much broader common ground between Catholics and Protestants in terms of private spirituality and devotional appetite, he assesses the mysticism of Puritans such as Francis Rous, before moving on to explore the role mysticism played in the antinomian challenge to Puritan orthodoxy in writers such as John Everard, Giles Randall and Ranter writers. By doing so, Temple sheds light on the widespread circulation and reference of mystical works and uncovers how such works became part of the process whereby radicalism was “forged, and forged repeatedly, from the discursive and cultural materials that lay to hand” (46).

Moving forward in Chapter 3, “Mysticism, Melancholy and Pagano-Papism, 1630–1670.” Temple argues that the confidence in citing mystical works such as those of Pseudo-Dionysius to legitimize personal and mystical experience would disappear during the Interregnum and Restoration periods. Temple highlights two major reasons for this transformation. The first is the inclusion of mysticism within an emerging narrative that attacked certain spiritual experiences by converting medical theory into polemical weaponry. Writers could then denounce those claiming authority through visions and prophetic experiences as suffering from “religious melancholy,” a dangerous mix of body illness and mental incapacitation. The second regards the historical validity of practices such as mysticism and alchemy as “genuine” parts of Christianity. Many scholars in the seventeenth century, partly seeking a source for the enthusiasms of their age, looked to beliefs such as mysticism with closer scrutiny than before. Compounding these anxieties was the tradition of philosophia occulta or occult philosophy, which sought to harness occult forces abound in nature, as seen in the influential writings of Swiss alchemist and astrologer Paracelsus and the De occulta philosophia of occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. In sum, mysticism was perceived as a dual-threat in the period, as it was both a source of religious melancholy and regarded as pagano-papism, or the continuation of heathen doctrines into Christianity, which was
corrected by the Reformation.

The penultimate chapter 4, “Rationality and Mysticism in the Restoration, 1660–1690” is divided into four parts. First, Temple explores Serenus Cressy’s early life and conversion to Catholicism. His conversion account, *Exomologesis* (1647), attracted many defenders of the Church of England. The second part of this chapter explores Cressy’s time as part of a group of scholars known as the Great Tew Circle, which featured the prominent author and theologian William Chillingworth. It was here that the notion of rationality as a foundation for doctrine, rather than a Catholic emphasis on tradition, manifested. The third and fourth parts of the chapter both explore Cressy’s polemical debates in the age of Restoration. They focus on the link made between mysticism and fanaticism by Protestant polemicists, suggesting that this ended legitimate claims to mysticism in England for the considerable future.

Temple closes the book with chapter 5, “Mysticism and the Philadelphian Moment.” Here he begins by tracing mysticism in the works of early Philadelphians before discussing the mysticism found in the works of Norfolk mystic Jane Lead. The chapter then assesses the interest in mysticism found in the writings of Richard Roach and Francis Lee, the two main leaders of the Philadelphian Society. Temple seeks to add to the argument first posited by Paula McDowell in which the historian claimed that it was the prevalent rhetoric of anti-enthusiasm which generated so much public criticism of the group. Their public approbation for works of Protestant mysticism, “such as those of earlier writers John Everard and Francis Rous, as well as Catholic works by Augustine Baker, Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, brought them into direct opposition with a body of criticism which, as we have seen, had mounted across the seventeenth century” (142). Their alignment with Continental mystical groups, including the Quietists in France and radical Pietists in Germany, also raised many suspicions among their English critics. Temple closes by exploring contemporary reactions to these engagements with mysticism, reasoning that it was this enthusiasm for all things mystical which led to the downfall of the Philadelphians.

To sum, Temple’s work is impressive for both its mastery of historical scholarship as well as its employment of primary evidence to sup-
port his findings. Throughout the book, the author sharply connects all parts of the work to the existing historiographical debates concerning mysticism. This is not an easy task as the introductory framework certainly reflects. Mysticism became an enduring phenomenon, one that morphed given the particular historical time and place. For those looking to develop a rich understanding of mysticism in seventeenth-century England, there will be much that is useful if not necessary. There is an impressive amount of research underpinning the entire study, and the author handles some complex and dense characters and their relevant works with admirable concision and clarity.


Caroline Bowden has been a major force in making available primary materials for the newly dynamic field of the study of early modern English nuns in exile. Many of these nunneries had vibrant textual cultures, producing both communal life writing, like the chronicles published in this volume, as well as biographies, autobiographies, and devotional works. This volume provides Bowden’s most recent, valuable contribution, building on the work she did as general editor of the six volume *English Convents in Exile, 1600-1800*.

Bowden’s book provides ready access to the two volumes of chronicles produced by the English Augustinian Canonesse of Bruges, a community founded as a daughter house of the English community of St. Monica’s in Louvain. As is often the case in writings produced in early modern English convents in exile, authorship is uncertain. It was typical for early modern female monastic authors deliberately to conceal their identities and for authorship to be a sort of collective, communal practice. As Bowden indicates, the *Chronicles* provide little detail about the sources used in compiling them, but they suggest that the authors drew upon such materials as chapter books, obituarists, and other manuscripts. The first volume comprises the history of the community for its first hundred years, between its foundation in 1629