

CHAPTER SEVEN

Self-Knowledge, Abnegation, and Fulfillment in Medieval Mysticism

Christina Van Dyke

Self-knowledge is a persistent—and paradoxical—theme in medieval mysticism, which portrays our ultimate goal as union with the divine. Union with God is often taken to involve a cognitive and/or volitional merging that requires the loss of a sense of self as distinct from the divine. At the same time, self-knowledge is portrayed both as a necessary precondition and sometimes as a lasting result of this union; for Christian contemplatives in the Latin West (particularly in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), the famous injunction of the oracle at Delphi to “know thyself” thus captures the importance of introspection prior to mystic union and, since such union is fleeting in this life, the need for continued self-scrutiny afterward as well.¹

¹ In this chapter, I will focus exclusively on Christian mystics in the Latin West between the late 1100s and the late 1400s. Cf. Aaron Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) and *Mystical Union in*

Mysticism within the Christian Latin West was not a homogenous movement, however, and apophatic and affective mysticism take different attitudes toward the ultimate goal of self-knowledge. Although both traditions portray introspection as important preparation for union with God, the apophatic tradition stresses the need to move past self-knowledge to the *loss of self* (self-abnegation), while the affective tradition portrays union with the divine as involving radical (and even physical) *self-fulfillment*.

Today, mysticism tends to be associated with transcending all attachment to the embodied self, a frequent emphasis in the apophatic tradition. Yet affective mysticism—which emphasizes the passion of the incarnate Christ and portrays physical and emotional mystic experiences as inherently valuable—was in fact the dominant tradition in the later Middle Ages. An examination of both traditions demonstrates that, in addition to constituting a necessary stage on the path toward union with the divine, self-knowledge in medieval mysticism was seen not just as something to be transcended, but (particularly in the works of female mystics) as a means of overcoming alienation from embodied existence.

7.1. SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN THE PURSUIT OF MYSTIC UNION

Before discussing medieval mystics' attitudes toward self-knowledge in any detail, it is important to note three features that make any such discussion problematic. First, there has been significant debate in the last century about what mysticism is.² Second, the expression of mysticism varies across geographic regions and changes over time (especially, as we'll see, between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries).³ Third,

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1999) for an overview of medieval Islamic and Jewish mysticism.

2 For a discussion of the complex politics involved in the struggle to define mysticism in the twentieth century, cf. Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), ch. 1.

3 In particular, the later centuries see a marked increase in the importance of personal piety and feminization of religious imagery. Cf., e.g., Herbert Grundmann, "Die Frauen und die Literatur

the majority of extant mystical literature from this period comes not from universities, but from monasteries and nunneries (and, in the later Middle Ages, from the “third order” of beguines and tertiaries, who served as lay members of religious orders); the texts we possess today are often secondhand reports of the visions of nonliterate mystics who spoke not in Latin but in the vernacular of their region.⁴ Thus, although self-knowledge is a common theme in medieval mysticism, it should not be understood as a topic that is addressed in a programmatic or cohesive way.

One belief that is common to the vast majority of medieval mystics, however, is that a connection with God that goes beyond the realm of normal earthly experience is possible (however fleetingly) in this life, and that this connection is the final goal of human existence. This belief, together with the characterization of mysticism as inherently *phenomenological* (“concerning individual felt experience in addition to systems of knowledge or belief”)⁵ and *transcendent* (“involving an encounter—whether direct or mediated, transformatively powerful or paradoxically everyday—with God”), provides a framework that encompasses an appropriately wide range of experiences while still capturing what seems distinctive of medieval mystic thought.

There was, for instance, widespread consensus among the medieval mystics that contemplative and mystic union requires careful preparation, and that this preparation must involve introspective knowledge of the self—understood both in general terms as knowledge of the structure of the human self and in personal terms as awareness of individual

im Mittelalter: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung des Schrifttums in der Volkssprache,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 26 (1936): 129–61; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 151–80.

4 For some of the issues this raises, as well as the effects it had on how mysticism has been treated as a subject of history, cf. Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

5 Nicholas Watson, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.

desires, behaviors, and vulnerabilities. This emphasis on upward progression via a series of stages originally stems from the Neoplatonic leanings of the early medieval mystics, but the idea that union with God requires careful preparation (and self-knowledge) remains constant even as mysticism increases among uneducated laypeople in the fourteenth century and the will (rather than the intellect) assumes the central role in guiding us along the path.

Self-knowledge is, in fact, often portrayed as the first step in mystical progress. In the early thirteenth century, for instance, the Flemish beguine Hadewijch's first vision involves being shown the tree of "the knowledge of ourselves" as the beginning of her mystical initiation.⁶ As she writes in a letter advising a fellow beguine: "If you wish to experience this perfection, you must first of all learn to know yourselves: in all your conduct, in your attraction or aversion, in your behavior, in love, in hate, in fidelity, in mistrust, and in all things that befall you" (Letter 14).⁷

Self-knowledge is seen as the product of rigorous self-examination, and a precondition for further growth and development. The late thirteenth-century Dominican Meister Eckhart claims that in order to progress spiritually, we need to identify and root out negative self-orientation. "Examine yourself," he writes, "and whenever you find yourself, take leave of yourself."⁸ The eventual goal of this self-scrutiny is to transcend attachment to the self altogether (as will be discussed in section 7.2), but "at the beginning there must be attentiveness and

6 "And I understood, just as [the angel] revealed it to me, that the tree was the knowledge of ourselves. The rotten root was our brittle nature; the solid trunk, the eternal soul; and the beautiful flower, the beautiful human shape, which becomes corrupt so quickly, in an instant" (*Garden of Perfect Virtues*). Translated text from *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Columba Hart (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 263. Original text, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, 2 vols., ed. Jozef Van Mierlo (Louvain: Vlaamsch Boekenhalle, 1924–25).

7 Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, 77. Original text, *Hadewijch: Brieven*, ed. Jozef Van Mierlo, 2 vols. (Louvain: Vlaamsch Boekenhalle, 1924–25).

8 Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds. and trans., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 250.

a careful formulation within the self, like a schoolboy setting himself to learn.”⁹

One of the central functions of this self-examination is to facilitate humility, which medieval mystics portray as essential for opening oneself up to union with God. As the anonymous fourteenth-century English *Book of Privy Counselling* explains, we are not able to rise immediately to experience of the being of God because of the “rudeness” of our spiritual feelings. “To let thee climb thereto by degree,” it continues, “I bid thee first gnaw on the naked blind feeling of thine own being.”¹⁰ The first stage in the gradual progression toward union with the divine is coming to terms with the reality of one’s own existence.

Mystics diverge somewhat as to the exact results of this self-examination, however. For some, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, this process engenders humility primarily by yielding an understanding of the self as a flawed version of the *imago Dei*. For others (such as Hildegard von Bingen, Hadewijch, and Julian of Norwich), self-scrutiny leads to humility by casting our finitude in sharp relief against the infinite divine. Hildegard (a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess) and Julian (a late fourteenth-century English anchoress) even heighten this gap by emphasizing their gender as well as their frailty, comparing their status as a “poor little female figure”¹¹ and “a woman, lewd, feeble, and frail”¹² with God’s unimaginable greatness. Introspection into our limitations is meant to open us to a deeper awareness of God’s unlimited attributes. In general, the idea is that the more conscious we are of our own failings and imperfections, the more we will notice God’s ultimate perfection and appreciate God’s unfailing love for us. As Hadewijch writes to a fellow beguine: “May God grant you to know

⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁰ Barry Windeatt, ed., *English Mystics of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 94. Original manuscript British Library Harley 674 (H), fols. 92r–110v.

¹¹ *Epistola 2*, in *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis*, ed. J. B. Pitra (Monte Cassino, 1882), 332.

¹² Julian of Norwich, “Revelations of Love,” in *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 189.

yourself in all things what you are in want of, and may you thus attain to a knowledge of the sublime Love that he himself, our great God, is” (Letter 27).¹³

The idea that introspection is the beginning of spiritual development and that the resulting humility is vital for progress toward union with the divine remains constant throughout the Middle Ages. There are two important shifts in attitudes toward self-knowledge from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, however. First, identifying the self with God becomes increasingly common.¹⁴ This is portrayed not as incompatible with humility, however, but as the culmination of the process of humbling oneself. One can be filled with God—one can *be* God—only when one has realized one’s infinitesimality next to God’s magnitude. When the female mystic who is the subject of the anonymous tract called the *Sister Catherine Treatise* comes out of her trance and says to her confessor, “Sir, rejoice with me, I am become God!”¹⁵ she is not expressing self-exaltation but rather the replacement of her self with God. As Bernard McGinn notes, this remark (and similar formulations) demonstrates “a widespread yearning to give expression to a new view of how God becomes one with the human person.”¹⁶ This understanding takes our status as “images of God” rather literally: we are not just meant to be conforming ourselves increasingly to the (ultimately unattainable) image of God that exists in rude form within us; we can, literally, image God.

13 Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, 107. Cf. *The Complete Works*, 49: “Even if you do the best you can in all things, your human nature must often fall short; so entrust yourself to God’s goodness, for his goodness is greater than your failures. And always practice . . . doing your utmost to examine your thoughts strictly, in order to know yourself in all things” (Letter 2).

14 For a book-length treatment of this topic (that focuses particularly on Meister Eckhart), cf. Ben Morgan, *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

15 Elvira Borgstädt, trans., “The ‘Sister Catherine’ Treatise,” in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 358.

16 Bernard McGinn, “The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500),” in vol. 4 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2005), 87.

Second, and perhaps noncoincidentally, there is a shift in emphasis over the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries from self-scrutiny's requiring the proper use of reason and resulting in knowledge of one's thoughts to introspection's requiring the will and resulting in proper affections. We can see both of these elements in play in Jan van Ruusbroec's *Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, where the early fourteenth-century Flemish mystic contrasts the joy of loving God with the humility of the intellect/mind:

Your heart will open wide to receive new gifts from God with deep desire for newness of life, and your desires will mount up to God like a fiery flame of devotion in thanksgiving and praise. Your mind will meanwhile descend in a sense of unworthiness and of humble self-disdain, and your reason will reveal to you your sins, your shortcomings, and your many failings. . . . For this reason, if you have self-knowledge you should always descend in a sense of unworthiness and self-disdain and then rise again with great veneration and reverence toward God.¹⁷

In general, although mystics continue to describe union with God as the end goal of a multistage process, there is a gradual shift away from the idea that this process requires intellectual training. What is necessary is careful introspection (of the sort any reflective person is capable of) and well-ordered desire, or love. In the words of the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, "Love, but not knowing, may reach to God in this life." That is, "God may well be loved but not thought" (ch. 8).¹⁸

17 John Ruusbroec, "Spiritual Abandonment and Consolation," in *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, ed. and trans. J. A. Wiseman (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 196. Original text, cf. *Werken*, ed. by the Ruusbroecgenootschap, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Tiel: Uitgeverij Lannoo, 1944–48).

18 The idea that union with God doesn't require being learned (or even formally literate) parallels the well-documented shift from the early twelfth century to the late fourteenth century in general attitudes toward the relation of knowledge and piety. Cf., e.g., Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism* and Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, particularly "The Female Body and Religious Practice."

7.2. SELF-ABNEGATION AND APOPHATICISM

As mentioned above, virtually all medieval mystics saw the kind of self-knowledge resulting from introspective self-scrutiny as the first stage toward union with the divine. They disagree substantially, however, about the role self-knowledge should play later in the process. In particular, apophatic mystics tended to portray awareness of embodied individuality as a feature of humanity that needs to be transcended in order to join with the God beyond thought. Affective mystics, on the other hand (see section 7.3), viewed their physical and emotional experiences as intrinsically valuable unitive states.

Although today mention of medieval mysticism brings figures such as Meister Eckhart to mind, and it forms part of a continuous tradition that begins at least with Plotinus, in its own day apophatic mysticism was the exception rather than the rule. Centering on the conviction that language and thought obscure rather than reveal the unspeakable truth of the divine, apophatic mysticism characterizes true union with the divine as fundamentally *antiexperiential*.¹⁹ Mystics could expect transcendent phenomenal experiences as part of the contemplative life, but they were warned not to be distracted by such experiences or to view them as valuable in their own right.

Meister Eckhart, for instance, enjoined his followers to detach themselves from such experiences, “tartly condemning those who want to see God with the same eyes with which they behold a cow.”²⁰ In his late fourteenth-century *The Scale of Perfection*, Walter Hilton also warns against accepting altered physical sensations as signs of true mystic union, whether “in sounding of the ear, or savoring in the mouth, or smelling at the nose, or else [the sensation of] any perceptible heat as if it were fire, glowing and warming the breast” (1.10).²¹ The *Cloud*

19 For a detailed treatment of this topic, cf. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

20 Meister Eckhart, *Essential Sermons*, 61. The sermon referenced is Sermon 16b in Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke und lateinischen*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936), 272.

21 Walter Hilton, “The Scale of Perfection” (Manuscript: Cambridge University Library MS Add. 6686), 284.

of *Unknowing* goes even further in its admonition against identifying any physical sensation (especially heat) as the true “fire of love” that results from union with God: “For I tell thee truly that the devil has his contemplatives, as God has his” (ch. 45).²² Although such experiences might occur regularly on the path to true union, they were not to be confused with that union.

Because God transcends all thought, emotion, and sensation, any sort of union with that God also requires moving beyond such things. Eckhart, for instance, consistently stresses the need for human beings to detach from all earthly things—including knowledge: “I say that a man should be set as free from his own knowing as he was when he was not [that is, before that person existed]” (Sermon 52).²³ As he goes on to explain, “The authorities say that God is a being, and a rational one, and that he knows all things. I say that God is neither being nor rational, and that he does not know this or that. Therefore God is free of all things, and therefore he is all things.” Knowledge of the self is needed for identifying and rooting out sinful self-orientation; it is necessary for developing the humility that allows us to lose ourselves completely in the hidden darkness of God. Self-knowledge is, however, one of the things that we must ultimately set ourselves free from (with God’s help).

An emphasis on self-loss and self-annihilation runs throughout this tradition, portrayed as a necessary part of detaching from the transient things of this world. Indeed, because our attachment to self is so fundamental, these mystics see the loss of self as one of the final stages in this process. In his *Counsels*, Eckhart captures a sentiment common to many apophatics when he says, “You should know that there was never any man in this life who forsook himself so much that he could not still find more in himself to forsake. . . . But as much as you go out in forsaking all things, by so much, neither less nor more, does God go in” (Counsel 4).²⁴ Emptying oneself is the final step in fully receiving (or becoming)

22. Ibid.

23. Cf. Meister Eckhart *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, 201.

24. Meister Eckhart, *Essential Sermons* 250.

God: “[After detachment] there is still one work that remains proper and his own, and that is annihilation of self” (Counsel 23);²⁵ “Perfect humility proceeds from annihilation of self” (“On Detachment”).²⁶

Apophatic mysticism has deep Neoplatonic roots, emerging in the Middle Ages via figures such as pseudo-Dionysius and John Scottus Eriugena. Accordingly, it is the intellect that is originally identified as the central aspect of the self—that by which we transcend, and the last of what needs to be transcended. Hadewijch, for instance, praises reason as one of God’s greatest gifts to humanity: “It is truly fitting that everyone contemplate God’s grace and goodness with wisdom and prudence: for God has given us our beautiful faculty of reason, which instructs us in all our ways and enlightens us in all works. If man would follow reason, he would never be deceived” (Letter 14).²⁷

As mentioned above, however, over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the will gains importance. Following on the antinomianist and “Free Spirit” movements, both self-knowledge and self-annihilation are increasingly understood in volitional rather than intellectual terms.²⁸ Although denounced as a heretic and burned at the stake in 1310, Marguerite Porete is not alone in her belief in that our final goal is the annihilation of the conscious self via the absolute surrender of our will to God’s. The result of this surrender is radical self-loss: “The whole is one to her without an explanation (*propter quid*), and she is nothing in such a one. Then nothing more remains for her to do concerning God than remains for God to do concerning her. Why? Because he is and she is not” (*The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ch. 135).²⁹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁷ Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, 77.

²⁸ For a history of this controversial movement, cf. Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

²⁹ Marguerite Porete, *Le miroir des simples ames*, ed. Romana Guarnieri (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986). For a recent English translation, cf. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. Colledge et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

This emphasis on the will's central role in self-abnegation is also echoed in fourteenth-century English works, such as the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*. Formal education is not required to surrender the self to God in love. In fact, to the extent that the intellect continues to search for knowledge, it gets in the way of perfect submission and loss of self.

Not surprisingly, given their understanding of our final end, apophatic mystics tend to associate the body with weakness and limitation. On the path to union with a God who transcends the senses, emotions, and even thought itself, any lingering attachment to the body and its individuality signals a reluctance to detach. The body is not inherently bad, nor are sensations and emotions inherently negative. Nevertheless, they represent a vital part of the individuality we need to move beyond. Self-knowledge is needed for us to reach our final goal, but it is transcended in our attainment of that goal.

7.3. FULFILLMENT OF THE EMBODIED SELF AND AFFECTIVE MYSTICISM

Affective mysticism, in contrast, developed in large part as a reaction to the persistent gnostic heresy (manifesting in the twelfth century as Cathar or Albigensian dualism) that physicality is inherently negative and that our goal as human beings is to liberate the spirit from the material realm. Although negative attitudes toward matter and the body do appear in affective mysticism (as they do in virtually all religious traditions), this tradition emphasizes Christ's Incarnation and Passion as demonstrating that the human body and the material creation are to be celebrated, not overcome. In particular, strong identification with Christ and his experiences on earth—especially the Passion—allows these mystics with a valid means of both positively conceptualizing and experiencing the embodied self.³⁰ Sense perception, physical states

³⁰ Karma Lochrie, for instance, characterizes affective spirituality precisely in terms of “its corporeality and the imitation of Christ's suffering humanity” Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 14.

(such bleeding, weeping, and “closure”), and emotions are understood not as distracting from true mystic union but as a valid way of experiencing it. To this end, self-knowledge is viewed not just as the first step toward union with God, but as one of the most important results of such union.

Although virtually unknown today, in its own day (particularly the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries), affective mysticism was the rule, not the exception. It viewed the relationship between human beings and God in a “newly bodily and emotionally laden way,” and “took such experience with special seriousness, making it increasingly central to religious life as the period wore on, devoting considerable literary, visual, and human resources to it, reposing extraordinary trust in its validity, and in the process permanently shaping the sensibilities, and (to a considerable extent) even the content, of western Christianity.”³¹ As amply demonstrated by the lives of the mystics of this time, true union with God (especially the second person of the Trinity, Christ) was seen to be found not in transcending physical reality but rather in recognizing and glorifying the mundane—including illness and suffering.

Thus, we find not only stories of mystics washing the feet of beggars and invalids, but also records of much more extreme practices, such as Ida of Louvain’s refusing to eat anything but moldy bread and Catherine of Sienna eating the scabs and drinking the pus from the sores of lepers. What to the modern reader looks like self-mortification is rarely (if ever) described as such by the figures in question. Instead, their emphasis is on identifying with the suffering of Christ and experiencing union with God in this way.³² Even the most intense physical

³¹ Watson, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, 2.

³² Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the extreme practices of affective mystics in detail in several of her works, but the essays in *Fragmentation and Redemption* are particularly worth attention, as is her treatment of the importance of food—and especially the Eucharist—in the lives of thirteenth- to fifteen-century mystics. Cf. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

suffering was received with joy by those who viewed it as experiencing God in the flesh.

What's more, these states were not viewed as impeding further intellectual or volitional union. Richard of Saint-Victor, for instance, explained that physical mystic experiences such as visions were useful for an understanding of the divine that would fulfill rather than empty the intellect.³³ Formal education is not seen as necessary for affective union, but intellectual and volitional development were often advanced as ways of drawing even closer to God. Thus, a wide variety of sensory, physical, and emotional states—hearing music and seeing visions, for instance, as well as physical closure (that is, not ingesting or excreting for long periods of time) and feeling ecstatic joy or sorrow—are all seen as an important part of mystic union in this tradition.

One of the primary functions of these experiences in the affective tradition was countering the self-alienation common to fallen humanity. Introspection makes us aware of our fallen nature and our need for connection with God. Humility is a result of this self-knowledge, but so is the recognition that God became human, and thus that our experiences are in a way also God's experiences. Know ourselves as bodily subjects is a way of knowing the Incarnated Christ. We become distanced from ourselves when we deny our true nature; conceiving of oneself in purely spiritual or mental terms is deeply alienating to creatures whose primary interaction with reality—created and divine—is physical.

It is not surprising in this context that the Eucharist assumes central importance in the mystic experiences of many figures within this tradition. Christina Mirabilis of Saint-Trond and Ida of Louvain are only two of the mystics who experienced intense cravings for the

33 Cf. Richard de St. Victor, *De Trinitate*, in *The Twelve Patriarchs*, trans. G. Zinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979).

sacrament. In fact, it became almost common for mystics—especially female mystics—to see flesh or taste honey in the Eucharistic wafer, or fall into ecstatic trances in sight of the elements.³⁴ According to Caroline Walker Bynum, “Paramystical phenomena were common in female (and increasingly in male) piety in the fourteenth century exactly because the fundamental religious goal was seen to be union with the physical body Christ took on in the Incarnation and daily in the mass.”³⁵ The belief that human beings are most closely joined with Christ’s divinity through his corporeity makes the ritual of partaking in that body especially ripe for mystical union—and a union that is simultaneously a fulfillment of the self’s humanity.

Affective mysticism took on extreme forms at times, and the vision of the self that it aligned itself with is earthy in a way that modern sensibilities have moved past. Yet in stressing union with God in terms of “God-with-us” just as much as “us-with-God,” it offers a hope for a holistic connection to the divine. Mystic union with the transcendent God results in a deeper appreciation for the human nature that Christ took on, and that we share. This acceptance rather than abnegation of the embodied self is perhaps best characterized by a vision of Marguerite of Oingt, in which after intense prayer, she received a vision in which she was a tree that, watered by Christ, flowered. And on her newly leafed branches she saw written the names of the five senses. This is a far cry from Marguerite Porete’s vision of complete self-abnegation: a state in which she is “nothing.”

7.4. CONCLUSION

Self-knowledge in medieval mysticism is a highly complex topic. There was general agreement in the Christian Latin West that introspection constitute a vital first step toward the ultimate goal of union

³⁴ Cf. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption and Holy Feast*.

³⁵ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 66.

with the divine, and also that self-scrutiny was necessary for developing the humility that allows us to open ourselves to God. Yet, as discussed above, we can distinguish between the attitudes toward self-knowledge in the apophatic mystics, who stressed self-abnegation, and the affective mystics, who saw their experiences as self-affirming. The distinction between affective and apophatic mysticism was not recognized at the time; much medieval mystical literature combines apophatic and affective elements. The distinction does prove useful, though, for correcting the modern impression that mysticism involves transcending attachment to the self and all of its attendant phenomenology.³⁶ Rather than merely constituting a stage on the path toward self-less union, mystic experiences can also be seen as a fulfillment of the embodied self in communion with God.

Acknowledgment

I owe many people thanks for comments and questions on this project, especially participants at the University of Konstanz “Self-Knowledge” workshop (July 2014), L’Abri Fellowship International, the University of Leeds Center for Philosophy of Religion seminar, the workshop “Analytical Existentialism” at the University of Ghent (October 2014), and the University of Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion reading group. This publication was made possible in part through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

³⁶ Evelyn Underhill, together with William James one of the most influential authors on mysticism in the modern age, is relentless in her criticism of affective mysticism, attributing episodes of ecstatic union and physical sensations to “the infantile craving for a sheltering and protecting love” that is “frequently pathological, and . . . often found along with other abnormal conditions in emotional visionaries whose revelations have no ultimate characteristics” (*The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* [Oxford: Oneworld, 1995], 20 and 23).