

MYSTICISM AND SEXUALITY

By BERNARD MCGINN

Let him kiss me with the kisses of the mouth, for your breasts are better than wine.
(Cant 1:1)

THIS OPENING VERSE FROM the Song of Songs, with its enigmatic address (who is speaking to whom?) and erotic imagery of kisses and breasts, was one of the central scriptural foundations in the history of Christian mysticism. From the early third century there is evidence that Christians were interpreting this passage, and indeed the entire Song, in the light of the text in Ephesians 5:23–32 where Paul connects human marriage with the mystery of Christ and the Church. In the 230s, the great exegete Origen in his commentary on the Song applied every text of this cycle of Jewish love poems not only to the relation between Christ and the Church, but also to the individual Christian:

As often as we discover something we have sought about divine teachings and understandings to be present in our heart without instruction we believe that ‘kisses’ have been given us by the Spouse, God’s Word.¹

Origen’s intellectualist reading of the kiss of the mouth as a communication of hidden divine teaching contrasts with Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century who interpreted it as ‘the sweet movements of love [*affectus*] that the Word and the soul express to each other’, stressing that only a soul totally drunk with love could dare to ask such a favour.² Teresa of Avila in the sixteenth century read the kiss of the mouth as peace, friendship and union with Christ, also recognizing how daring it was to make such a request: ‘Lord, though they are daring to say it, you will pardon one whom your love has drawn out of himself, as well as others’.³ Even within living memory this mode of reading the Song of Songs could still be found. In 1923 the Benedictine spiritual writer Savinien Louismet, Abbot of Buckfast, issued a commentary on the first five chapters of the Song, in which the longing for the kiss is the desire for ‘that act of divine contemplation which is properly “Mystical Theology”’.⁴

The use of language drawn from sexual love – physical descriptions of the beauty of the lover, as well as images of longing and meeting, of burning and swooning, of kisses, embraces, and even of intercourse – have been so widespread in the history of Christian mysticism that any attempt to give a brief survey is impossible.⁵ One might suppose that it was largely because of the inclusion of the Song of Songs in the canon of scripture that Christians were allowed to make use of sexual imagery, but this scarcely explains the popularity of erotic mysticism. It was only in the post-Enlightenment period that the Song became in some way suspect – a kind of embarrassment to ‘decent’ Christians. For fifteen and more centuries, pious Jews and Christians viewed it as a central, we might even say *the* central, text of God’s revelation to his people. Origen was typical in seeing it as the greatest of the Bible’s songs, the one that expresses the highest form of its whole inner teaching. Indeed, if Christianity had not had the Song of Songs, it might well have had to create one, in a way analogous to how Sufi mystics utilized pre-Islamic love poetry (*Qasida*) in order to express their pursuit of the Divine Lover.

The seemingly necessary link between mysticism and erotic language is also evident in the use of kinds of love-language not directly tied to scripture, such as those relating to courtly-love traditions, in later Christian mystics. Perhaps forms of language drawn from the experience of sexual love are unavoidable in mysticism, as Simone Weil suggested in noting that

To reproach mystics with loving God by means of the faculty of sexual love is as though one were to reproach a painter with making pictures by means of colours composed of material substances. We haven’t anything else with which to love.⁶

But is this really true? Surely, there are other human relations, such as friendship and parental love, which suggest themselves as equally or more appropriate, at least to some of us.⁷ And sexual language bears innate dangers of which the mystics themselves, especially the commentators on the Song of Songs who often warned their readers against taking its images literally, were well aware. In the modern period, the growth of psychology and the psychoanalytic movement have provided alternative explanations why so many mystics have preferred to employ sexual images in their accounts. Not all would maintain as crude a view as one early investigator, James Leuba, who argued that ‘the delights said by our great mystics to transcend everything which the world and the senses can procure involve some activity of the sexual organs’.⁸ But it is certainly permissible to doubt that all mystics were always aware of all the reasons why they found sexual images so attractive.

The relation between mysticism and sexuality in Christianity is particularly complex because of the history of Christian attitudes toward sex. In the related monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam, for instance, sexual practice, as well as sexual images, could and often did play an integral role in the mystical itinerary to God. This is especially true in Judaism, where the commandment to procreate was the culmination of the way in which many mystics, particularly of the major schools of Kabbalah, helped integrate the male and female supernal powers, or *sephiroth*, whose disruption had brought evil into the world, especially the evil of the exile of the Jews from Israel.⁹ Even in Islam, where the archetypal early female mystic, Rabi'a, shunned marriage to devote herself fully to love of God, the majority of mystics were married. According to the 'Supreme Master' (*ash-Sheikh al-akbar*) of the Sufis, Ibn Arabi, the sexual activity of the true mystic, or gnostic, is the favoured way to achieve union with God who is both active and receptive.¹⁰

Christianity, at least orthodox Christianity after the defeat of Gnosticism, did not reject the goodness of the body, sexuality and marriage. But the triumph of the ideal of virginity in the fourth century introduced a number of tensions into the history of Christian mysticism that shaped much of its development.¹¹ Jews and Muslims were able to develop types of mysticism that made use of transformed sexual activity, that is, marital intercourse practised within and as a part of a spiritual discipline. Christian mystics had this door largely closed to them because of the way in which marriage and sexual activity were viewed as at best a 'second-best' and the attendant conviction that single-minded dedication to the Divine Lover precluded involvement with a human one. In order to see how this came about, we need to look briefly at Origen whose Song of Songs commentary was the Magna Carta for the use of sexual imagery in Christian mysticism.¹²

Origen begins from the fundamental Christian conviction that 'God is love' (*agapē*, 1 Jn 1:4). But the great exegete insisted that *agapē* and *erōs* (which we might best translate as 'yearning desire') were interchangeable and that therefore all forms of what we might call erotic attraction, among which desire for sexual satisfaction was the most powerful, were actually rooted in the transcendental desire by which God created and redeemed the world. (Origen was the first in the Greek tradition to identify *erōs* with the highest God.) The Alexandrian's understanding of how *erōs* functions, however, was governed by a divine view of material and spiritual reality.

If what is good is also praiseworthy, the good is properly not found in bodily usages, but first of all in God and in the soul's virtues; therefore

only that love is praiseworthy which is directed to God and the soul's virtues.¹³

This hierarchical distinction involving a division or separation between the material and spiritual objects of *erōs* provided the theoretical basis for the complex social and cultural triumph of the ideal of virginity in Christianity over the centuries. Its effects on Christian mysticism have been both positive and negative.

Christian mysticism, like Jewish and Islamic mysticism, has always implied the transformation of the sexual energy of *erōs* as a way of attaining God. Indeed, we might say that erotic transformation is even more important in Christianity in so far as Christian mystics conceive of God as the love who is *agapē-erōs*. If God is erotic in a transcendental sense (as the mysterious fifth-century writer Dionysius, the creator of mystical theology, insisted),¹⁴ then the power of *erōs* is necessary in order to attain him. But Christians also held that in the fallen world *erōs* had gone astray in so severe a fashion that directing it to material goals, especially sexual enjoyment, either did not contribute, or more likely precluded restoring it to its transcendental source. The transformation of *erōs*, then, involved learning to re-direct the energies of yearning desire, primarily through the proper interpretation of the erotic language of the Song of Songs (and later of other forms of love language). Here, too, Origen was a leader in being the first to present an explicit theory of the 'spiritual senses', that is, the internal 'organs of mystical knowledge' by which the soul experiences God. The sensual descriptions of the Song of Songs had to be translated into the language of interior consciousness of God's action on the soul in order to realize their real meaning.

The effects of this particular form of erotic transformation in Christian mysticism have been powerful and far-reaching. The exclusivity of the mainstream of classical Christian mysticism, which held that only by a life of abstention from sexual activity could one hope to achieve the transformation of *erōs*, seems to have given Christian erotic mysticism a power and profundity in its exploration of sexual images to describe the divine-human encounter that is truly remarkable. This erotic fixation has often made timid believers nervous and unfriendly investigators like Leuba indignant: 'Is the flesh likely to remain unmoved when continence is combined . . . with indulgence in the imagery dear to the libertine.'¹⁵ What upset Leuba does not seem to have troubled the mystics or their readers, even when the language is quite graphic. For example, note how the twelfth-century abbot Rupert of Deutz describes his dream-vision of embracing and kissing the crucified Christ 'for a long

time' and feeling Christ open his mouth 'so that I could kiss him more deeply'.¹⁶ Or consider the following description of the encounter between Christ and Angela of Foligno that took place on Holy Saturday, 1294:

. . . in a state of ecstasy, she found herself in the sepulcher with Christ. She said she had first of all kissed Christ's breast – and saw that he lay dead, with his eyes closed – then she kissed his mouth . . . Afterwards she placed her cheek on Christ's own and he, in turn, placed his hand on her other cheek, pressing her closely to him. At that moment, Christ's faithful one heard him telling her: 'Before I was laid in the sepulcher, I held you this tightly to me.'¹⁷

More important than the use of erotic images, however, was the way in which Christian mystics, both male and female, worked out comprehensive and often profound theories of the nature of yearning desire itself, though space precludes any detailed investigation of the theories of great mystics like Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross or Hadewijch, Mechthilde of Magdeburg or Teresa.

Another result of the role of virginity in the transformations of *erōs* is that it appears to have been a major factor in the important place taken by women in Christian mysticism. Within the patriarchal world of traditional western societies, virginity created a new space for women, one relatively free of the control of fathers and husbands and open to forms of religious expression otherwise unthinkable. Though women rarely got to speak in their own voice in Christian mystical literature before the twelfth century, the female virgin was the archetype of single-minded mystical desire for God, especially since all erotic lovers of God were supposed to consider themselves as female, that is, passive in relation to Christ the Divine Bridegroom. (This gender malleability was encouraged by the feminine word for soul, *anima*.) From the thirteenth century on, the role of women writers in the history of mysticism took on a whole new dimension. Many of these women mystics lived traditional or new forms of the religious life pledged to virginity: even those who had been married, such as Angela of Foligno, Margery Kempe or Catherine of Genoa knew they had to turn away from sexual activity in order to be fully devoted to the Divine Lover. Scholars such as Caroline Bynum have argued that the women mystics of the late Middle Ages differed from Origen and his followers in undercutting the Alexandrian's theory of the necessity of dividing bodily *erōs* from its spiritual expression, noting the more 'embodied' character of much female mystical literature.¹⁸ This may well be true of some male mystics too. In

any case, it did little to change the ancient Christian view of virginity as the higher state and the necessity that mystics felt to eschew sexual activity.

It is true, of course, that not all forms of Christian mysticism were either highly erotic in expression or explicitly virginity-based. In the later Middle Ages especially, there were mystics who did not make much use of erotic language and whose mode of presenting the encounter between God and human was indifferent to any particular form of life or mode of religious practice. Meister Eckhart is a good example of someone who warned of the danger of seeking God in ways of life; and Julian of Norwich, though she herself lived as an anchoress, never expresses preference for any particular way of life. But even in mystics such as these, the best we can say is that the issue of whether or not one engages in sexual activity is a matter of indifference for their mysticism, not an integral part of it as we find in most Jewish and much Islamic mysticism.

From a contemporary perspective, the attitude of Christian mysticism toward erotic activity will doubtless seem paradoxical. On the one hand, Christian mysticism is shot through with transformed *erōs*, while on the other it has generally insisted on a strict separation between sex and sanctity. Paradox, of course, is in many ways of the essence of mysticism. The notion of some form of direct or unmediated contact between God and the human has seemed not only paradoxical but blasphemous to some believers, especially Protestant Christians. The idea that if such contact could be found in this life it could ever be really expressed – how can the infinite God be circumscribed by human speech? – may seem even stranger, especially to those who consider the contradiction involved in *speaking* about what is supposed to be *ineffable*. Much of the history of Christian mysticism revolves around the creation and evolution of the proper forms of paradoxical speech to present the possibility of transformation in God to the reader. We can ask, however, if the lived erotic paradox of using highly sexual language while avoiding sexual activity is the only possible form of Christian mysticism, especially today.

The history of Christian mysticism, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere, can be understood according to a geological metaphor in which certain great layers of tradition continue to exist within the larger whole while new strata come to overlay and intermingle with them in complex and creative ways. The earliest forms of Christian mysticism were created in the patristic period and carried on into the Middle Ages within the matrix of the monastic life. They were dominant until the end

of the twelfth century, but they did not die out then. This monastic mysticism continued to exist and to nourish new forms of mysticism primarily associated with creative new modes of religious life, especially the Mendicants and the *Frauenbewegung*, or 'women's movement', that found its greatest fruit among the Béguines and second-order Mendicants. Neither of these strata, nor those which came after them, offered much encouragement to the incorporation of married sexuality into the mystical journey. Some investigators, like Irving Singer in his *The nature of love*, have argued that it was not until the seventeenth century, subsequent to the positive valuation given to marriage in the Reformation, that we find the first real attempts to bring out the sacred and at least potentially mystical character of bodily sexual love, in figures like John Donne whose poems such as 'The Canonization' and 'The Ecstasy' witness to this new stage.¹⁹ Without entering into exactly when and how this growing appreciation of sexuality as a possible 'spiritual' experience itself grew in Christianity, there is no question that today it represents both a conviction on the part of many Christians and a problem on the part of those who seek closer contact with God, not least because the classical mystical tradition provides so little support for it.

If the present interest in spirituality and mysticism indicates the possibility of the beginning of what might become a new layer, or strata, in the long story of Christian mysticism, one that does not cancel what went before, but rather both learns from it and yet still creates its own new possibilities for deeper life in God, then the issue of what to do with sexuality forms, along with that of the absence of God in contemporary society, one of the most serious problems to be addressed. Doubtless, there will be those Christians who will insist, along with the tradition, that erotic encounter with God is so intense, so all-consuming, that it is difficult to conceive how it could coexist with a full human sexual life. But others will argue that there is nothing in Christianity and its message about divine *erōs* which makes this necessary. Here Christians may have much to learn from the ways in which Judaism and Islam have been more successful in not dividing sexual practice from lives devoted to mystical encounter with God. But there are also resources within the Christian tradition that may not have been fully explored. Let me close this brief account by reflecting on one of them.

The notion of the *ordo caritatis* is one of the oldest and most perduring in the history of Christian mysticism, and one that was taken from the Song of Songs. In the Vulgate text, the Bride says that her Lover 'introduced me to the wine [and] ordered charity in me' (Cant 2:4).²⁰ Many of the great mystics and commentators on the Song of Songs

made use of this notion of order of charity to sketch out how all human loves were to be hierarchically organized and energized by the priority of the love of God. If *agapē/caritas* and *erōs/amor* are really one and the same, as Origen and the mainstream mystical tradition have always held, then the ordering of *erōs* does not *necessarily* entail the exclusion of sexual activity, as Origen thought. It is clear that the Alexandrian's thought suffers from a serious inconsistency here, though one perhaps understandable in his cultural milieu. Renewed attention to a fuller conception of the order of charity that would include sexual activity as among the most powerful and privileged expressions of the divine *erōs* that creates and sustains the universe is among the most needed tasks confronting mystical theology at the present. The integration of *erōs* into Christian mysticism is not a work that will be easily accomplished, but it is a work that must be begun.²¹

NOTES

¹ Origen, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Book 1 GCS edition vol 8:92.5–8.

² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 7.2–3, *Sancti Bernardi opera omnia* 1:31–2.

³ St Teresa of Avila, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, 1.12, *Obras completas de Santa Teresa*, BAC edition p 337.

⁴ Dom Savinien Louismet OSB, *Mystical initiation* (London, 1923), p 20. Louismet's commentary does indicate a break with the tradition by his avoidance of comment on 'the verses of the Canticle of Canticles which is not advisable, on account of the infirmities of the present condition, to propose to every one as a subject for study and meditation', p vi. These consist of all references to 'breasts' in Song 1–5.

⁵ For more extensive comments on the approach adopted here, see Bernard McGinn, 'The language of love in Christian and Jewish mysticism' in Steven T. Katz (ed), *Mysticism and language* (New York and Oxford, 1992), pp 202–35.

⁶ Simone Weil, *The notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans Arthur Wills (London, 1976), vol 2, p 472.

⁷ Many erotic mystics, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, would deny this, insisting that only the marital love of man and woman allows for the mutuality and intensity that provides a human analogue to mystical union. See e.g. *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 7.2 and 83.3–5.

⁸ James Leuba, *The psychology of religious mysticism* (London, 1925), p 138.

⁹ See Moshe Idel, 'Metaphores et pratiques sexuelles dans la Cabale', *Lettre sur la sainteté*, trans Charles Mopsik (Paris, 1986), pp 327–58.

¹⁰ See Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd, 'Mysticism and sexuality in Sufi life and thought', *Mystics Quarterly* 18.3 (1992), pp 82–93.

¹¹ On this complex topic, see especially Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (New York, 1988).

¹² For a more detailed treatment of Origen, see Bernard McGinn, *The foundations of mysticism* (London, 1992), pp 118–26.

¹³ Origen, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Prologue 72.25–73.1.

¹⁴ (Pseudo) Dionysius, *The divine names*, 4.7–14.

¹⁵ Leuba, p 144.

¹⁶ Rupert of Deutz, *The victory of the Word of God*, 12 (PL 168:1601).

¹⁷ Angela of Foligno, *Memorial 7*, L. Thier and A. Calufetti (eds), *Il libro della Beata Angela da Foligno*, p 296. I use the translation of Paul Lachance, *Angela of Foligno: complete works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 1993), p 182.

¹⁸ See e.g. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York, 1992).

¹⁹ Irving Singer, *The nature of love, Vol 2, Courtly and romantic* (Chicago, 1984), pp 195–205.

²⁰ In the Old Latin text that was also available to medieval mystics the phrase appears in the imperative: 'Order charity in me'.

²¹ This is not to deny that some valiant attempts to integrate sexuality and mysticism are to be found in modern thought. See e.g. Vladimir Solovyev, *The meaning of love*, trans Jane Marshall, revised by Thomas R. Beyer (New York, 1985).