

CHAPTER 17

EROTIC AND NUPTIAL IMAGERY

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INTRODUCTION

‘THE mystical discourse of love thus shows that the erotic and the sacred need not be understood in terms of radical opposition’ (Jeanrond 2010: 18). ‘Radical opposition’ is, as Werner G. Jeanrond notes in his *A Theology of Love*, the default position of much contemporary Christian theology when confronted by eros (see Jeanrond 2010: 27–8). Yet, the tide appears to be turning. In certain quarters philosophers and theologians are beginning to ask why Christian agape should not be expansive enough to incorporate eros (Marion 2007; Burrus and Keller 2006; Kamitsuka 2010). Jeanrond points out that there is perhaps no better place to look for a positive response than the mystical theology of the patristic and medieval periods (Jeanrond 2010: esp. 67–96). This chapter sets out explore (1) how and why mystical theology in the West embraced the erotic, configuring humanity’s relationship to God in terms of marriage, and (2) what might be gained from taking such an approach to Christian love seriously.

I would like to begin with an event which Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1439), an English mystic, records in her *Book*, in which she claims that in Rome, on 9 November 1414, she married God the Father—despite already being married to one John Kempe. She records in her vision of the ceremony how Mary and the Saints looked on and prayed for the couple’s future happiness and that the marriage resulted in spiritual and physical pleasures:

The Father also said to this creature [Margery], ‘Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end.’... she was still and did not answer..., but wept amazingly

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Hannah Young, my sister and my friend.

much, desiring to have himself [‘Christ Jesus, whose manhood she loved so much’] still, and in no way be parted from him . . . And then the Father took her by the hand [spiritually] . . . saying to her soul: ‘I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, provided that you are humble and meek in doing so . . . And then the Mother of God and all the saints that were present there in her soul prayed that they might have much joy together.’ . . . [She], with great abundance of tears, thanked God for this spiritual comfort . . . for she felt many comforts, both spiritual comforts and bodily comforts.

(1.35, 2816–19, 2843, 2848–55, 2858–9, 2860–3; Windeatt 1985: 124)

What are we to make of this seemingly extravagant claim? What possible spiritual value is to be found in such a bringing together of the sacred and the erotic? Are they not better kept apart? Is this nothing more than a childish fantasy? Indeed, should erotic love of any flavour be valued as spiritual? It is such questions that I hope to address in this chapter.

EROS AND NUPTIAL IMAGERY: THE BACK STORY

As Bernard McGinn has pointed out (1992: 211), any account of erotic love in the Christian mystical tradition starts within Origen (185–254), for it was he who bequeathed to the West the idea that the Song of Songs was one of the most important spiritual texts in the Bible and that Christian theologies of love were in some sense nuptial. He did so in dialogue with the cultural understandings of his day (see Edwards 2013: 103–8). Origen, arguably the Christian mystical tradition’s first founding father, received a formal philosophical education under Ammonius Saccas (the teacher of Plotinus) (Louth 1981: 53). Already a Christian, Origen was keen to justify scripture’s anthropomorphic representations of God to a Hellenistic culture for whom they seemed deeply simplistic. More than this, he was convinced that the Christian wisdom of the Bible was more than a match for the wisdom of the Platonists.

In this relation, Origen argued that scripture operates on both literal and spiritual levels and that some passages do not have ‘a logically coherent narrative meaning’ (Origen, *On First Principles* 2.5; Greer 1979: 183). These in particular, he claimed, were intended to aid the soul enmeshed in the world to rise beyond the physical, back to a God who transcended all. As Gordon Rudy comments, ‘Origen claims the Logos is especially present in those passages most inappropriate to God and spiritual things. Because their obvious meaning cannot be accepted, they . . . force the exegete to find an immaterial and spiritual referent, and so lure the interpreter beyond the material realm to immaterial spirit’ (2002: 21). He understood the Song of Songs, which speaks of sexual union, and which Jewish, as well as Christian exegetes, like Ambrose, had understood as an

allegory of the union between God and his people, to be the supreme example of such a non-literal text (see McGinn 1992).

Also underpinning his hermeneutic was Origen's belief that all the wisdom of the Platonists was already present within the Bible if only one understood how to interpret it. For him, a key example was the works of Solomon—Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs—which, in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, he posits as a spiritual trilogy prior to the Stoic triad that advocated spiritual progress (1) through the acquisition of virtue, (2) acting according to one's true nature, and (3) receiving insights that transcended the physical in the 'epoptic' or 'mystical' stage (see Edwards, 2013: 108 n. 24). As he states, 'It seems to me, then, that all the sages of the Greeks borrowed these ideas from Solomon, who had learnt them by the Spirit of God at an age and time long before their own' (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 3; Lawson 1957: 40, also see 39ff.). The Stoic model was one of increasing introspection and reflecting this Origen added a further emphasis on the individual soul as bride of Christ the bridegroom to already existing Jewish and Christian allegorical readings (see Edwards 2013: 104). The Song of Songs, for Origen, thus brought together two facets of mystical theology: it acted as a prior example of Hebrew wisdom and it demonstrated circumstances in which the text could not be read literally.

Origen came to view the erotic and nuptial images of the Song of Songs as a form of divine outreach, through which God lifted souls from a worldly understanding of love to a rarefied transcendent one. The text for him demonstrates God's love for humanity in offering an account of love in language that we can engage with, so as to progress beyond it:

Since, then, it is impossible for a man living in the flesh to know anything of matters hidden and invisible unless he has apprehended some image and likeness thereto among things visible, I think that He who made all things in wisdom so created all the species of visible things upon earth, that He placed in them some teaching and knowledge of things invisible and heavenly, whereby the human mind might mount to spiritual understanding and seek the grounds of things in heaven; so that taught by God's wisdom, it might say: *The things that are hid and that are manifest have I learned.* (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.12; Lawson 1957: 220–1)

For Origen, the erotic and nuptial imagery opens up a vista of love and sensation of which human eroticism and sensation are but dim metaphorical echoes. Yet as a consequence, Origen believed that the text held great dangers for the uninitiated and spiritual novice, who might simply interpret its language of breasts, kisses, and union literally:

But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach [the Song of Songs], to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the

spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust! For this... I therefore advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood... to refrain completely from reading this little book...

(*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 1; Lawson 1957: 22–3)

The very last thing that Origen wanted was that someone should read this text and think that the Bible was ‘egging him on to fleshly lust!’ However, as Mark Edwards points out, ‘only a desultory reader would take... any text in the Song of Songs under Origen’s guidance as a charter for profane love’ (Edwards 2013: 105). As Edwards comments, Origen’s understanding of spiritual love was far more rarefied, and only in this vein did he speak of nuptial relations between God and the soul:

A commentator on the Song of Solomon may freely speak of this inward conflagration—he may even speak of the nuptials of the soul and Christ, and of the chastity of their offspring—since the Christian who is admitted to the perusal of this book will already know that a prurient application of its imagery would not be consistent with the notorious wisdom of its author. (Edwards 2013: 107)

As in Plato’s *Symposium*, Origen spoke of an eros that carried none of the physical taint of the erotic as manifest in ordinary life (see Edwards 2013: 107 n.23 and Rist 1964: 206–9).

Gordon Rudy therefore points out that, although Origen also introduces the idea of spiritual sensation into mystical theology, he intended no connection with physical sensing. It is rather a hermeneutical tool: ‘[b]iblical references to sense organs and sensation [that] label something that allows the inner person to apprehend the spiritual meaning of the Bible and be transformed by it’ (Rudy 2002: 26). Edwards stresses, however, we should be cautious in assuming that no experiential element underpins Origen’s exegesis. At the same time we should not try to detach Origen’s ideas of spiritual sensation from intellectual exegetical study; for Origen they were one and the same. As Edwards notes, Origen does not provide ‘a detailed chronicle of his inwards throes and ecstasies for the sake of other aspirants to a communion with God’ (Edwards 2013: 105). Neither does Origen suggest that the ordinary carnal meaning of eros is spiritual desire. His understanding of true love for God is nonetheless intense and passionate and Origen believes rightly spoken of in terms of eros, despite the Bible not favouring this term (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 2; Lawson 1957: 30–3). Indeed, in so arguing Origen provided a platform of intimacy, born out of scriptural exegesis, on which others would build greater sanctity into the human capacity to love and feel. We find its beginnings in the eleventh–twelfth centuries, which witnessed a great revival of interest in human love and its place within Christian society (see Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*; Reddy 2012; Classen 2002; Cooney 2006; Spearing 1993; Scaglione 1963; Duby 1994).

MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENTS: EROS HUMAN AND DIVINE

There is little doubt that the most important of the theological responses came from Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), who produced a series of highly influential sermons on the Song of Songs, as well as a treatise on love, *On Loving God*. Bernard's innovation was to add to the Christological dimension of Origen's approach a new emphasis on Christ's humanity and its relation to the anthropomorphic language of the Song (however, see Zona 1999). This allowed Bernard to justify the incorporation of human forms of loving into Christian spirituality rather than place the truly spiritual completely outside the realm of the physical, as Origen had arguably done. We can illustrate this if we briefly consider how Bernard understands the incarnation, along with his sense of spiritual progress as exemplified by a series of kisses.

In sermon 20 in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard states that the purpose of the incarnation was to recapture human affections and that the act of falling in love with Christ in human form opens the door to love of his divinity. Love itself draws you from one to the other:

I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.

(Sermon 20.4.6; Walsh 1981: 152)

Rather than suggesting that human love be restrained, Bernard argues that it simply needs to be redirected. In so mooted Bernard clearly intimates a closer connection between God and the soul than advocated by Origen's treatment of eros—in which human love was little more than a dull metaphorical echo of its true erotic counterpart. As Bernard goes on to claim:

carnal love is worthwhile since through it sensual love is excluded...it becomes better when it is rational, and becomes perfect when it is spiritual.

(Sermon 20.5.9; Walsh 1981: 154)

Thus it is that in exegeting the verse, 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth' (Song of Songs 1: 1), Bernard writes of different levels of love or kisses by means of which one may approach God. First there is the kiss of God's feet, that is, Christ's humanity, from which one can progress to the kiss of the hand—Christ's divinity—after which, on rare occasions, one may be allowed to kiss the kiss of God's mouth, that is, enter into an intimate union and knowledge of God. In the first stage you realize that your sins have been forgiven, in the second you receive the grace to persevere, finally you are ready for intimate union. The image of kissing makes clear that the stages are cumulative:

Though you have made a beginning by kissing the feet, you may not presume to rise at once by impulse to the kiss of the mouth; there is a step to be surmounted in between, an intervening kiss on the hand... I do not want to be suddenly in the heights, my desire is to advance by degrees... You will please him [God] far more readily if you live within the limits proper to you, and do not set your sights on things beyond you. It is a long and formidable leap from the foot to the mouth... Still tarnished as you are with the dust of sin, would you dare to touch those sacred lips... Once you have had this twofold experience of God's benevolence in these two kisses, you need no longer feel abashed in aspiring to a holier intimacy.

(Sermon 3.2.3; Walsh 1981: 18–19; also see Sermons 2 and 4)

In so suggesting, I think that Bernard would have disagreed with both Andrew Louth and Josef Pieper that Christian theology's proper task is to 'hinder and resist the natural craving of all the human spirit' (Pieper 1952, quoted in Louth 1983: 146). For Bernard, the ordinary focus of our natural carnal cravings is simply misdirected. Indeed, he argues that '[carnal] devotion to the humanity of Christ is a gift, a great gift of the Spirit' (Sermon 20.4.8; Walsh 1981: 154). It may not be the highest part of love, but it is nonetheless necessary to 'love God with your whole the heart' if one is to love God at all (Sermon 20.4.6–9; Walsh 1981: 153–5). Thus, Denys Turner seems right in claiming that Bernard was in love with God at every level and erotically so (Turner 1995b: 79ff.; also see Sommerfeldt 1991: 95–151 and Casey 1988). Indeed, although Bernard does not conflate physical and spiritual sensations, unlike Origen he never suggests a disembodied love of God; even after the resurrection he stresses that human embodiment continues to impinge on one's loving union (Edwards 2013: 108). Whilst one could construe this negatively, Bernard treats it positively, for in exegeses of the Song of Songs he delights in the redirection of carnal love to spiritual ends rather than simply in rarefied and 'spiritual' love.

In this vein, Bernard also developed the nuptial understanding of the Song of Songs in a more intimate direction. From Origen, he had inherited a tradition of reading this text as a dialogue between a bride and bridegroom, with the bride interpreted as both the Church and the individual soul in communion with God, the groom (Edwards 2013: 104; also see Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 29.16; also see Halflants 1981: pp. ix–xxx; Moritz 1980). Yet M. Corneille Halflants points to the deeply sensitive quality of Bernard's writing that weaves together personal and communal experience, as for instance when Bernard notably writes:

Today the text we are to study is the book of experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from his heart: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.'

(Sermon 3.1.1; Walsh 1981: 16)

Bernard here invites the readers/listeners into the possibility of sharing in a deep relationship with the divine, one that is configured in nuptial terms. As Bernard elsewhere writes, 'We do not hesitate boldly to proclaim that every soul, if it is vigilant and careful in the practice of the virtues, can arrive at this holy repose and enjoy the

embraces of the Bridegroom' (Sermon 57.4.11 in Halflants 1981: p. x). His closer association of spiritual and earthly marriage echoed society's stance as a whole, which, as Edward Schillebeeckx notes, drew increasing parallels between earthly marriage and the vows taken by religious women, such that in the ceremonies both assumed a veil (Schillebeeckx 1965: 34–64). Indeed, the way in which he loves God challenges the division between physical and spiritual love that Origen had put in place, and so opened the way theologically for far more physical responses to spiritual love, as I will discuss.

Yet Bernard was not the only author exploring the place of the erotic within theology in the twelfth century. The idea that spiritual love is cumulative, and incorporates a human component, is also found in Richard of St Victor's *Four Degrees of Violent Love*. Here Richard (d. 1173) argues that marital/romantic love and love for God are two sides of the same coin, such that both progress through four stages or degrees:

Therefore the first degree of violence [vehement love] exists when the mind cannot resist its desire, while the second degree exists when that desire cannot be forgotten. Truly, the third exists when the mind can know nothing but its desire, while the fourth, which is also the last, exists when not even that very thing his mind desires is able to satisfy it. (*On Love* 2.17; Kraebel 2012: 282)

The first of these loves he describes as 'insuperable', the second 'inseparable', the third 'singular', and the fourth 'insatiable'. According to Richard, only the first of these has any place within a healthy human marital relationship; insuperable love can be of benefit in binding the marital partners together. Yet, beyond this he regards investment in human love as a slippery slope into the melancholia of love-sickness that ultimately ends in madness and hatred (see Wack 1990):

like an invalid beyond hope, this man lies down with half-dead limbs... the man who pants under the flame of this sort of boiling desire... whatever consolation is offered, it does not touch his mind... It is as if he were near death... In this state love (*amor*) often turns into something like madness... still more amazingly, often at the same time, they hate one another, although they never cease to boil with desire...
(*On Love* 2.15; Kraebel 2012: 281)

This same drive, however, when put to spiritual ends, is deeply beneficial. Instead of leading to physical catatonia the soul experiences a death to self that allows it to attain an incredible level of union with God in which love flows mutually (Arblaster 2015: 131). This is a different kind of self-annihilation, one that is a new/true (re)birth. Drawing on St Paul, he states that Love causes the soul to melt and then remoulds it:

Therefore, when the soul has in this manner been melted away in the divine fire, inwardly softened and thoroughly liquefied, what then will remain except that 'the good will of God, pleasing and perfect,' be displayed to the soul, as if that divine will were a certain mold of consummate virtue to which it might be shaped?... this type

of man becomes a new creature: 'the old things have passed away, and, behold, all things have been made new.' For in the third degree he has been killed; in the fourth, as it were, rising from the dead, 'he dies no more; death no longer has dominion over him, insofar as he lives, he lives for God.' (4.42, 45; Kraebel 2012: 293, 294)

In so suggesting, Richard, like Bernard, advocates that human love is not fundamentally distinct from the love of God, even if it is God's Love that ultimately unites the soul to God. Richard regarded such love of God as the proper end of the human propensity to desire.

Yet, unlike Bernard, Richard seems to claim that the final degree is a permanent state, one fully achievable in this life. Indeed, Boyd Taylor Coolman comments that in this text there is little to differentiate the union that the soul attains from beatific vision (2013: 259). Richard appears to hold that the final stage of love involves human willing being entirely subsumed within God's own willing, a position reinforced by the teaching mission on which the soul finally embarks, which is described as giving birth. Richard employs nuptial imagery to explicate a fourfold movement through the levels of love from engagement, to marriage, through sexual union, to spiritual pregnancy: 'In the first degree a betrothal is made, in the second a marriage, in the third sexual union, in the fourth childbirth' (4.26; Kraebel 2012: 286).

The idea that a complete union of wills occurs by means of love is discussed in a more structured theological sense in the same period by William of St Thierry (c.1085–1147/8), who joined the Cistercian Order late in life, having previously been a Benedictine abbot (Bell 1984). William stresses with great intensity that to love God is to become part of the love through which God loves God's self. It is to share, in an incomprehensible way, in the love which is the Holy Spirit, who, for William, is the 'substantial union' between the Father and the Son. It is thus to know God as God knows God's self. As he states, 'It is one thing to recognize God as a man recognizes his friend, another to recognize Him as He recognizes himself... the recognition which is mutual to the Father and Son is the very unity of both, which is the Holy Spirit' (William of St Thierry, *Mirror* 15.31; Davis 1979: 75).

William often closely echoes and builds on Augustine, another of the founding fathers of the Western Christian mystical tradition, whose mystical theology of love was also deeply influential in this period (see Louth 1981: 142ff.; Howells 2010: 95–104). William follows him in accepting that extramission accounts for the way in which love can transform the soul (*Mirror* 15.26–30). Extramission was the scientific theory that in seeing the eyes emit a ray of light that then brings back an impression of an object into the soul. Almost as though the soul were wax, the eyes press this image into the soul. The more one gazes upon an object lovingly, the greater the impression—with the result that what one contemplates with love transforms not only the soul but also the body (since both are connected). William illustrates this by referring to the Old Testament story of how Jacob placed mottled sticks before his sheep when they were mating with the result that the coats of their offspring were tarnished (*Mirror* 15.29; Gen. 30: 37–43). Following

Augustine, William reasons that spiritual sight is an even more powerful form of seeing and so works similarly. As Margaret Miles writes of Augustine:

Just as, in physical vision, the will unifies, in the act of vision, two separate entities—the viewer and the object—so in the vision of God, it is love, ‘a stronger form of the will,’ that, in the activity of loving, connects and unites human longing with God’s activity of love. (Miles 1983: 135)

For William then love is the soul’s ultimate sense, uniting divine and human desire. In accord with Augustine, he does not consider this to be an alien or unnatural process. Rather William stresses that the soul is itself the image of God, evidenced through its capacities to love, know, and remember. Union of divine and human will is thus a process of spiritual anthropological recovery. Equating love with the activity of the Holy Spirit, William can describe the possibility of a most intimate union between God and the soul. In his *Mirror of Faith* he argues that this process cannot be complete in this life. Indeed, in this text he appears more cautious than Richard about the nature of such union. John Arblaster argues that William’s understanding of unity of spirit must nonetheless be seen as radical (*Mirror* 17; Davis 1979: 82; see Arblaster 2015).

These are far from the only theological discussions of the erotic, however, that the twelfth century bequeathed to mystical theology. We have space to consider just one final writer, whose ideas were also deeply influential, Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129) (see McGinn 1996: 328ff.). Rupert, a Benedictine abbot, was also writing within a monastic context. (see Curschmann 1988; Diehl 2013; Lipton 2005; Saucier 2012). At the end of his life, in his lesser known *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, he recounts an experience which for him had, years earlier, signalled his call to priestly ministry. One evening, Rupert experienced how, in a dream, Christ called him into a mutual kiss. Walking towards the altar, he witnessed it break in two, allowing him to approach the image of the crucified Christ which hung before him and so kiss Christ on the mouth. As he kisses him, Christ opened his mouth to allow Rupert to kiss him more deeply: ‘I held Him, I embraced Him and kissed Him long and profoundly. I noticed how happily He received this sign of love, for in the kissing, He opened his mouth so that I would kiss Him more deeply’ (Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore filii hominis super Mattheum* 12.383; tr. J. Arblaster). Around thirty days later, whilst in bed, as soon as he closed his eyes, he experienced a presence above him—the figure of a man. He explains how this figure entered into him, penetrating him to his very core in a way that he could not describe:

Above me came something that resembled a man, who bent forward, and stretched himself equally over me. He only hid his face, as much as possible. He came in to me, and filled the whole substance of my soul. He impressed himself in me, in such a way that I cannot express it adequately in words.

(Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore filii hominis super Mattheum* 12.383; tr. J. Arblaster)

These two experiences were the culmination of an earlier one in which God entered Rupert such that he felt a substance moving around within his spiritual womb:

A kind of shining weight of an ineffable substance, a living substance, came down... This entered into my breast... it woke me up from my sleep... soon it began to move, to move in the womb of the inner person... This living thing and real life whirled around in a marvellous way. Its circular movement became each time larger than the previous one and much wider... swirling inundations occurred, one after the other, until the last stream flew over as a broad stream... Then, it turned around and, in circular movements in the other direction, ran out at the left side.

(Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore filii hominis super Mattheum* 12.378–9; tr. J. Arblaster)

From these passages it seems that Rupert experienced a Marian-type annunciation. The Holy Spirit entered into him, copulating with him and causing him to become pregnant. That he describes these events in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, the most liturgical of texts, reinforces that, for Rupert, his priestly role was born out of his union with God. Yet his account suggests a deeper incorporation of physicality into spiritual union than we find in those of Bernard, William, or Richard (also see Arblaster, 2015 on John of Fécamp).

These writers created a legacy of erotic, physical, and unitive love that responded to the cultural issues of their day and which together allowed for an understanding of spiritual love very different to the rarefied eroticism advocated by Origen. It opened the way for sensual discussions of mystical marriage and for erotic encounters with the divine in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries when different cultural issues were being raised and which, as Bernard McGinn has commented, further collapsed the divisions between physical and spiritual knowing that Augustine and Origen had constructed (see McGinn 1998: 155). Interestingly, these developments are mostly found in the writings of women.

EROTIC AND NUPTIAL LOVE: BODY AND SOUL

Rupert experienced God quite physically in his body. Female authors, like Hadewijch, also do so, integrating such experiences firmly into their mystical theologies. We know little about Hadewijch. She was clearly well-educated, with knowledge of secular love literature, for she speaks of the love between the soul and God as *minne*—the term for intense erotic love employed within this genre (see Rudy 2002: 68–9). We can illustrate the intensely physical and erotic nature of her love for God in relation to a vision she experienced when taking communion. Like Rupert, hers too is a liturgical encounter.

As she eats Christ's body and drinks his blood in the eucharist, she has a sense of union with God that is positively orgasmic. Again, as in Rupert's account, God comes to her in the form of man:

[H]e came to me in the form and clothing of a man... Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in the form of taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. (Hadewijch, Vision 7; Mommaers 1980: 281)

Although the passage is somewhat atypical in her writing, from this short extract we get a sense of one of the ways that physical and spiritual sensation collapse in Hadewijch's theology. Yet lest we should assume that hers was a theologically unsophisticated response to love, Gordon Rudy stresses that underpinning it is a carefully developed ontology that combines Christological and sacramental awareness:

These Eucharistic passages emphasize how Hadewijch's language of tasting and touching is profoundly Christological, that those born of *minne* [spiritual love] know and are one with God both because they participate ontologically in the nature of *minne* and because they act and sense God in this world in the body, especially in receiving the Eucharist. (Rudy 2002: 94–5)

Indeed, Hadewijch builds on William's idea of 'substantial union' (see Arblaster: 2015), yet extends the sense of connection between soul and body. As Rudy comments, 'Hadewijch observes no strong distinction between matter and spirit, soul and body; she assumes that people know, become like, and can be unified with God as an integrated whole, soul and body' (Rudy 2002: 67). Hadewijch in no sense reduces the language of the Song of Songs to a physical experience, rather we find a complex interplay at work between the rhetoric of experience as theological tool for knowledge of God, as employed by Origen, Bernard, etc., and her sense that body and soul cannot be divided. It is in this nuanced sense—which modern readers, post-Freud, struggle to grasp—that Rudy speaks of Hadewijch having 'a concept of spiritual sensation based on a single human sensorium', that is, one in which physical and spiritual sensation cannot be prised apart (Rudy 2002: 76; also see McGinn, 1995). As Rudy stresses, this somewhat sets Hadewijch apart from the more bodily, imaginative spirituality of which Caroline Walker Bynum writes (Rudy 2002: 73ff.; Bynum 1988: 153–61; Bynum 1991: 190–1; however, see Elliott 2011).

Bynum notes that a more literally embodied sense of union with God finds an outworking in numerous later discussions of mystical marriage written by women. Gertrude of Helfta is a case in point. She speaks of Christ visiting her in the form of 16-year-old boy. Her encounter is charged with an eroticism redolent of secular love literature, despite being interlaced with scripture:

I heard these words: ‘I will save you. I will deliver you. Do not fear.’ With this, I saw his hand, tender and fine, holding mine . . . and he added ‘With my enemies you have licked the dust (cf. Ps 71.9) and sucked honey among thorns. Come back to me now, and I will inebriate you with the torrent of my divine pleasure.’ (Ps. 35.9).

(Gertude of Helfta, *Herald of Divine Love* 2.1; Winkworth 1993: 95)

Similarly, Mechtild of Hackeborn ‘envision[s] Christ lying by her side in bed, holding her with his left arm so that “the wound of his heart was joined so sweetly to her heart”’ (Elliot 2011: 179, quoting Mechtild of Hackeborn, *Book of Special Grace* 2.32). Such writings evidence an engagement with the devotional *imitatio Christi* so popular at the time, which Hadewijch appears to eschew (see Arblaster 2015; Arblaster and Faesen 2012). It encouraged one to imagine oneself present at the events of Christ’s life and death so as to develop deep affection for Christ’s humanity—as Bernard had recommended (see Swanson 1998). An example of how such devotion became conflated with erotic and nuptial theology in later medieval spirituality can be found in the writings of Bridget of Sweden (c.1373) whose mystical marriage appears to be enacted in quite literal terms. God takes her for his wife and states that as his bride she will now be privy to divine secrets. Bridget’s account is known to have influenced Margery Kempe (see Yoshikawa 2007: esp. 54ff.), with whose account of mystical union we began.

Whilst fascinating in and of themselves, the question that this chapter set out to consider is whether such ideas have anything to offer to contemporary theology. In conclusion, I would like to offer a few reflections on the potential value of embracing anew some of the theological directions into the erotic that mystical theology opens up.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE EROTIC ANEW?

The mystical theology that I have drawn attention to posits a deep connectivity between God and humanity via erotic love, one essential to human anthropology. Denys Turner believes that as such it offers important theological insight into how we should understand and speak about God (and humanity’s relationship to God). Turner holds that one of the attractions of the Song of Songs for medieval theologians was its potential to provide a language through which to proclaim the paradox of God’s relationship with humanity: both united and simultaneously Other (Turner 1995b). It is an idea that is indeed fundamental to mystical theology, as this passage from Julian of Norwich makes clear:

And so I understood that man’s soul is made of nothing, that is to say that it is made of nothing that is made, . . . to the making of man’s soul he would accept nothing at

all, but made it. And so created nature is rightfully united to the maker, who is substantially uncreated nature, that is God.

(Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, LT 53; Colledge and Walsh 1978: 284; also see Faesen 2012)

Here Julian argues that when one sees one's relationship with God aright, one realizes that nothing separates the soul from God, even though an essential distinction between Creator and creature nonetheless remains. Talk of erotic union aided understanding of how this paradox could work and helped medieval authors to stress the centrality of love to all human–divine relations. Thus, contrary to Anders Nygren who argued that this corrupted Christian agapic love by confusing it with Platonic ideas of eros, Turner argues that in fact it lends Christian discourse about God a philosophical sophistication that it would have otherwise lacked (Nygren 1932–9). Contrary to later writers such as Jean Gerson (1363–1429) medieval exegetes saw no conflict between the language of union and human freedom:

Unless we understand such language... as deliberately paradoxical, as striving, through paradox, to combine in equal measure the apparently opposed, then it collapses into sheer unintelligibility—or, more commonly, it is read as exhibiting an excessive, perhaps even an obsessively morbid, emphasis on the union of the lover and the beloved, at the expense of human identity and the freedom of the soul's own agency. (Turner 1995b: 61; see Gerson 1969)

The two did not compete. Erotic desire, Turner stresses, held them in paradoxical tension—just as it does in the most intense human relationships, such as when in *Wuthering Heights* Cathy declares that she is Heathcliffe (Turner 1995b: 64).

Turner, however, is deeply suspicious of the more experiential medieval responses to the erotic we have discussed. He views this 'experiential turn' as a denigration of mystical theology proper, one whereby it loses the capacity to fully maintain the paradox of both God's immanence and transcendence (thereby misunderstanding the spiritual nature of eroticism). As he states in his *Darkness of God*,

This mediaeval tradition of 'mysticism' conceived of as the moment of negativity immanent with the ordinary practice, theoretical and moral, of the Christian life, disappears when the dialectic is detached from the metaphoric, leaving the metaphoric discourse stranded, as it were, in isolation, minus its underpinning hierarchy of ontology and epistemology. (Turner 1995a: 272)

Alexandra Barratt arrives at a similar conclusion in her assessment of Margery, arguing that one cannot describe her spirituality as mystical or even theologically sound. Barratt cannot accept that the seemingly fantastical eroticism we find in Margery's experiences of God leads to an actual encounter with the Transcendent. To her mind, it does nothing but bear witness to a selfish tendency in much late medieval devotion: '[n]arcissism and despair are more likely to result from this kind of spiritual exercise than self-knowledge

and repentance' (Barratt 1998: 58). Many modern readers may also find Margery's account at best childish; for as we saw Margery collapses spiritual marriage into its literal counterpart, imagining God the Father taking her by the hand and reciting marriage vows, 'for richer, for poorer', whilst Mary and the saints look on approvingly.

Yet while in no sense denying the theological richness of Turner's reading of medieval Song of Songs commentary, in isolating eroticism from notions of experience it seems to me that both Turner and Barratt risk painting erotic and nuptial theology as little more than metaphorical God-talk with strong ontological overtones. Whilst medieval discourse of erotic love arguably depends on and thus guarantees a sense of otherness between the protagonists, it seems unclear what this medieval counterpart really has to say to a Jean-Luc Marion, except in pointing out that his Other depends on the self in ways that medieval authors would have found unacceptable and vice versa (see Jeanrond 2010: 155ff.; Citot and Godo 200: 6; Marion 2007). Conversely and perhaps surprisingly, medieval theologies of love that risk a carnal, bodily, and experiential engagement are, I believe, redolent with possibilities for twenty-first century theology, or at least this is what I will briefly argue.

Western contemporary society is becoming bored with the overt carnality that has filtered into almost every facet of life. *Playboy Magazine* recently announced that from now on its models will be partially clothed; overt nudity replaced with the subtle and gauche in order that fantasy and imagination might be re-engaged (*Metro Belgique* (FR) 14 Oct. 2015: 6). Surprisingly, mystical texts, especially those written by women in the later Middle Ages, argue for an analogous position: the importance of engaging one's imagination, but doing so without descending into fantasy. They promote a wise imagination, which is 'the presence of the spirit of God, [as] the best possible guide that man or woman can have' to borrow a phrase from George MacDonald (1895: 28); one that holds onto the hope that within the human psyche there lies the possibility of reinvesting sacred value in all of creation, but particularly in the female form. Margery Kempe's mystical marriage may, on the one hand, seem fantastical, indicating a desire to be loved in a manner not present in her earthly martial circumstances. Yet there is not perhaps anything terribly wrong with that, if the hope onto which she holds is that she is loved body and soul by her Creator, whom she cannot know except in so far as she comes to love herself. To suggest that this would not have been transformational for Margery, as Barratt does, seems short-sighted (however, see Salih 2017).

This is not, however, to deny that Barratt is right to assert that medieval spirituality should nonetheless be approached with caution. Much late medieval devotion revels in an almost pornographic violence, replete with anti-Semitism. Julie Miller argues that the metaphorical use of this imagery in female-authored texts at times comes close to embracing a God who willingly overpowers an unsuspecting woman in a manner disturbingly redolent of late medieval justifications of rape; an idea that must be railed against (Miller 1999). However, in claiming this Miller has in mind a writer like Hadewijch, who, as we have seen, operates with a rhetorical and theological sophistication that pushes beyond such horrific understandings of union. Margery certainly encounters no such God. God will not take her as his wife without her consent. Her God

is a modern man, abreast of new legislation that invalidated any ‘marriage’ laid claim to as a consequence of forced union. Indeed, Margery’s God was one who gave her hope that, despite all the consequences of her marital situation, she was and always would be pure and holy and totally worthy of both spiritual and physical pleasure, a state evidenced in after-effects that manifest themselves in her body as well as her spirit: ‘for she felt many comforts, both spiritual comforts and bodily comforts’ (Windeatt 1985: 124). The very immanence and experientialism of her imaginative encounter with the erotic was precisely what allowed Margery to understand love as suprahuman and so transcendent, setting her on a deeply Bernardine path.

Thus, although the contemporary atheist philosopher Slavoj Žižek claims that nothing can overcome our cravings—that in a sense we are hopelessly lost in an erotic narrative of our own making—medieval mystical theology begs to differ (Žižek 1999). Medieval mystical theology posits God as the never-ending end point of all our hungry desires; limitless enough to allow us to endlessly seek. It is a point that both Richard of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux make in describing the highest form of spiritual love as ‘insatiable’ (Richard of St Victor, *Four Degrees of Violent Love*; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* 11.33) and one which Bernard clearly ties to carnality in a way which perhaps only a Margery can make accessible to contemporary Western audiences, who seem desperately in need of the possibility that erotic love might in some sense also be sacred and transformational. Indeed, late medieval society held that it was only from a position of imaginative devotion that one could start to the climb towards any sense that love could lead beyond the seen and understood, to what the *Cloud*-author calls: ‘This blind impulse of love towards God for himself alone, this secret love beating on this cloud of unknowing’ (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 9; Walsh 1981: 139).

There is much more that could be said about the contemporary possibilities held out by the erotic and nuptial found within mystical theology. The purpose of this chapter has been to open up these possibilities and explain why both the erotic and the nuptial hold such a key place within mystical theology. Despite certain dangers, ‘The mystical discourse of love... shows that the erotic and the sacred need not be understood in terms of radical opposition’ (Jeanrond 2010: 18). On the contrary, there is much to be gained by reinvesting in the erotic following a mystical lead.

SUGGESTED READING

Burrus and Keller (2006); Jeanrond (2010); McGinn (1992); Turner (1995b).

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