

CHAPTER ONE

Platonic Mysticism

In the introduction, we began with the etymology of the word “mysticism,” which derives from *mystes* (μύστης), an initiate into the ancient Mysteries. Literally, it refers to “one who remains silent,” or to “that which is concealed,” referring one’s direct inner experience of transcendence that cannot be fully expressed discursively, only alluded to. Of course, it is not clear what the Mysteries revealed; the Mystery revelations, as Walter Burkert suggested, may have been to a significant degree cosmological and magical.¹ But it is clear that there is a related Platonic tradition that, while it begins with Plato’s dialogues, is most clearly expressed in Plotinus and is conveyed in condensed form into Christianity by Dionysius the Areopagite. Here, we will introduce the Platonic nature of mysticism.

That we focus on this current of mysticism originating with Plato and Platonism and feeding into Christianity should not be understood as suggesting that there is no mysticism in other traditions. Rather, by focusing on Christian mysticism, we will see much more clearly what is meant by the term “mysticism,” and *because* we are concentrating on a particular tradition, we will be able to recognize whether and to what extent similar currents are to be found in other religious traditions. At the same time, to understand Christian mysticism, we must begin with Platonism, because the Platonic tradition provides the metaphysical context for understanding its latest expression in Christian mysticism.

Plato himself is, of course, a sophisticated author of fiction who puts nearly all of what he wrote into the form of literary dialogues

between various characters. Hardly anything he wrote can be attributed fully to him, because what constitutes Plato's thought really belongs to his characters—making Platonism uniquely oblique as philosophico-religious expression. But such a literary approach allowed Plato to express in coyly allusive ways what I have elsewhere termed “the contemplative ascent” and “illumination.” This approach also meant that Platonism was not bound to ancient paganism but could be introduced comfortably into other religious traditions, including Christianity. The metaphysics is portable.

Plato expresses himself in figures, analogies, symbols: mysticism in Plato is expressed indirectly, in terms of wingéd ascent, as remembrance of truth, as initiation into mysteries, but not, for the most part, in terms of pure transcendence. In *Phaedrus*, Plato famously describes as a kind of erotic madness the desire of the soul to ascend to authentic and true beauty when seeing beauty on earth, or the beauty of the beloved. What we long for, in this kind of madness, is the “most blessed” “beatific vision” of our initiation into the mystery of the realm of the gods, “shining in pure light.” We remember this primordial vision, Plato tells us, and we long to return to it.² He describes how the lover, upon seeing the beloved, begins to grow wings and to undergo both pain and joy as he seeks to ascend. Because of our desire for the beloved, we are willing to give up all other earthly things, happily living in poverty if only we can be near our beloved, and through our love we enter into a “happy band” of those who live in the realm of light.³

A very similar vision is outlined in *Symposium*, where the stranger woman Diotima of Mantinea instructs Socrates on the ascent from earthly to transcendent beauty by initiation through love. One comes eventually upon wondrous and transcendent beauty that does not belong to the realm of change, does not wax or wane, that does not correspond to any physical or intellectual object, but rather is “beauty absolute,” simple and eternal. This essence of beauty cannot be understood by referent to any aspect of existence, but rather by negation; to be rapt in contemplation of it is to enjoy immortality and to become “the friend of God.”⁴

This Platonic tradition of contemplative ascent through initiatory love recurs in later mystical traditions in Sufism and in Christianity. This kind of ascent is not only devotional, though it is that, but also specifically a kind of contemplative ascent through the image of the beloved, at the center of which is transcendence. The lover's

longing for the beloved, and the spiritual path through the beloved into the transcendence of self and other is clearly a Platonic theme embedded deep in the dialogues, but it is also visible in the forms of love mysticism we find much later in Sufism and in Christian mysticism.

It is true, of course, that both Sufism and Christian mysticism are profoundly indebted to Platonism. The Platonic tradition was transmitted into Christianity through Dionysius the Areopagite, and later through authors like John Scotus Eriugena, to name only the most influential channels. But we should also recognize that the contemplative ascent through initiatory love that we see in *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* is beautifully expressed there but does not require Plato's dialogues in order to be rediscovered. Plato's references in his dialogues to ascent through love and beauty refer to an enduring aspect of human inner life that does not require reading the dialogues in order to be rediscovered by the ardent lover. Plato gives expression to what every ardent lover intuitively knows, and what a medieval woman mystic in love with Christ has experienced, too, whether she has heard of Plato or not.

While Plato's dialogues are obviously pagan and polytheistic, they also are not opposed to monotheism in the sense that one god is sometimes referred to in the dialogues as the supreme one, for instance Zeus, of whom all the others are by implication derivative. And the Platonic tradition often refers to *to ev*, "the One," which is a metaphysical concept that is not monotheistic but could be interpreted as harmonious with some types of monotheism. Hence Platonism can be imported quite easily into those forms of monotheism that assert, as in Islam or Christianity, a single transcendent deity, less easily into those that posit a personal or tribal god. Without doubt, mysticism in Christianity, and no doubt in other forms of monotheism as well, even if it is not explicit, owes an enormous intellectual debt to Platonism.

The heart of mysticism is the transcendence of subject-object duality, and that is what we find expressed in different ways in Plotinus's extraordinary and virtually inexhaustible exposition in *Enneads*. Whereas in the modern idiom, "mysticism" is often synonymous with "the irrational," Plotinus effortlessly joins reason and its transcendence: he is consummately rational in his efforts to express different facets of what we may term transcendental consciousness. In *Ennead* 5, for instance, he writes about the distinction between "one

thing thinking another, and something thinking itself.” The latter, he continues, “goes further towards escaping being two.”⁵ Following the same logic, he continues, “that which is beyond the primary thinking principle will no longer think,” because thinking requires an object of thought, hence duality, whereas what is beyond being is also beyond thinking. Perfection and perfect unity/identity is beyond thinking that requires objects of thought. This transcendence is not opposed to thinking; it is not irrational, but it encloses and transcends rationality.

Plotinus also beautifully engages the religious language of the ancient gods to express much the same point. In *Ennead* 5, Plotinus writes about the contemplative ascent to intelligible beauty in terms of ascent to the realm of the gods, among whom Zeus is the most illuminating and beautiful. Zeus, the closest to pure transcendence, illuminates and dazzles everything and everyone, and those who gaze upon him see different facets of his transcendence but all are illumined and transformed by seeing him.⁶ What is more, all those who ascend to such beauty and illumination themselves become illumined by it, as if suffused with the red-gold light of a transcendent earth upon which they now walk in the presence of the gods.

And here Plotinus concludes with a key point: for those are not merely spectators of the gods; there is “no longer one thing outside and another outside which is looking at it,” for “the keen-sighted has seen [what is] within, although having it, he for the most part does not know he has it.” One has the vision of the god in oneself; for this magnificent visionary spectacle does not entail external objects to be perceived; it is, rather, a revelation of what is within, and ultimately it is a revelation not of duality but of unity, of transcendence. This higher reality has its own light, and that light never changes; it is only we who do or do not perceive it and that which it illuminates in the higher, intelligible realm where lives beauty surpassing any earthly beauty.⁷ And all of this is within, not outside us; it is more intimate to us than we ourselves.

But the language of the ancient gods is not necessary to express the transcendence to which Plotinus refers, and in fact at other points in the *Enneads* his language, while not monotheistic, nonetheless works both in a pagan and in a Christian context. He writes about transcendence that one should not try to understand it through other things, that is, through similes or metaphors, but should seek to grasp it as it exists in “itself, pure, mixed with nothing, in which all

things have a share, though nothing has it.”⁸ It cannot be measured and “does not come within range of number”; it is not limited; it has no shape, no parts, and no form.⁹ He likens this transcendence to participation in the Mystery rites and remarks that “men have forgotten that which from the beginning until now they want and long for.”¹⁰ But he also uses theistic language, remarking that “the Good” that “transcends all things” “makes them and lets them exist by themselves, while he remains above them.”¹¹

Still, neither polytheistic nor theistic language is actually necessary for Plotinus; later in the fifth book, he offers a different analogy. All men, he says, begin with sense perception when they are born, and there are some who during life begin to awaken to what is above the sensory. But there is “a third kind of godlike men who by their greater power and the sharpness of their eyes” are raised above the clouds, “overlooking all things here below,” and “delighting in the true region which is their own, like a man who has come home after a long wandering to his own well-ordered country.”¹² And what is this region of which Plotinus writes? It is beauty, and wisdom, but these are characteristics or expressions of it. In essence, it is “true Intellect.”¹³ This Intellect is beyond the soul, beyond being; and since it “possesses itself in peace, is everlasting fullness.”¹⁴

The Platonic tradition as represented in the work of Plato and Plotinus—as well as Proclus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Damascius, and others in this lineage—is not philosophical in the modern sense of discursive analytical disputation, but rather represents the headwaters for what in Christianity becomes known, broadly speaking, as mysticism. Of course Platonism expresses itself through discursive exposition—no doubt of that. So too, often, do mystics. But the discursive exposition of a Plotinus, for instance, is not an end in itself; it is rather at the service of the contemplative ascent and transcendence, as is clear in these passages from Plotinus’s *Enneads*. The word “mysticism” in this context refers to the contemplative ascent from a condition of perceived duality (divided subject and object) and suffering, to the transcendence of duality or subject/object division, and a concomitant beatitude or joy. This ascent is clearly there in Plato’s dialogues, especially *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, as also in Plotinus, and in the many mystics who belong to the broader current of Christian Platonism.

The headwaters of this tradition are to be found in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, who probably lived in the fifth century

AD, but about whose identity there is still much speculation and little certainty, even with regard to which century he belongs. There are, of course, others whose work is also important to understanding subsequent mysticism in the Christian tradition—one thinks here of Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Evagrius Ponticus, and the Desert Fathers, for instance. All of these are important in different ways for understanding mysticism as it develops through subsequent centuries. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, distinguished an authentic Christian gnosis from false gnosis, hence providing a precedent for understanding a current within Christianity as having gnostic insight at its center. But among the many important figures during the early period of Christianity, Dionysius the Areopagite remains essential for contextualizing and understanding subsequent currents of mysticism.

That Dionysius's works belong to the larger current of Platonism, but diverted into Christianity, can hardly be gainsaid. There are, of course, differences, as indeed there are major distinctions to be made between Platonists proper. Just as Proclus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus are each distinctive, so too each of them is distinct from Dionysius. Whereas all Platonists properly speaking are pagan, Dionysius is incontrovertibly Christian, and his subsequent influence on mystics in both the West and the East is vast. What makes Dionysius so remarkable is that he preserves essential elements of Platonism, but in a new Christian theological context.

It is not to give enough recognition to Dionysius's achievement, though, to say only that he preserved the essential elements of Platonism, for what he also did was synthesize Platonism in a way that provides a contextual framework for all of Christian mysticism. Central among these is the Dionysian concepts of *via positiva* and *via negativa*, or kataphatic and apophatic mysticism, the notion of ascent through contemplation of symbols or images (that which is posited) and the notion of ascent through negation of all sensory or conceptual attributions. Also essential is the concept of hierarchy in the celestial realms, mirrored in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. For Dionysius, the ecclesiastical hierarchy is not a matter of clerical positions, but of gnostic illumination—those who are above are the initiators of and channels of divine grace for those below them. These two aspects—contemplative ascent and the descent of divine grace through initiation—are of course complementary and distinctively expressed in the Dionysian synthesis.

Dionysius expresses his gratitude to his own illuminated teacher, Hierotheus (revealer of divinity), thus indicating that he belongs to an

initiatory lineage himself, and by implication, by reading his treatises we are ourselves initiated into the lineage too. In this way, Dionysius (like Clement of Alexandria and some others) creates a space for an authentically gnostic dimension and lineage at the center of Christianity. In fact, if one accepts the Dionysian body of work as a whole, then one is effectively centering Christianity not on belief or articles of faith, but on direct inner knowledge and illumination. This esoteric understanding of Christianity is the basis for Christian mysticism.

But aren't only theistic, dualistic, exoteric forms of Christianity "orthodox"? To answer this question, we have to recognize that from at least the time of the Nicene Creed (381 AD) on, much of what we currently understand as Christianity, particularly in the West, in actuality has been exoteric, that is, consisting primarily in professions of faith or belief around which are bodies of accumulated doctrines in which one also has to profess belief in order to be a member. Exoteric Christianity is, in its very nature, dualistic, in that it posits an eternal separation between the believer and his God, often presented as a deity with whom one has a personal relationship. The monotheistic God, in the more extreme forms of exoteric religion, is seen as separated not only from believers, but from the world as well. The afterlife is also largely conceived in bifurcated terms of heaven and hell. And many of those from such a perspective would say that only exoteric forms of Christianity are orthodox. Indeed, in the contemporary world, that only exoteric Christianity exists is in fact true for most people. Dionysius the Areopagite and the tradition of Platonic mysticism simply do not exist for the vast majority of Christians, including theologians.

However, the tradition of Platonic mysticism does in fact exist. As Willigis Jäger points out, Plato "played a definitive role in the West in creating a non-theistic theology." Plato, Jäger adds, "does not recognize an ontological dualism, despite all the false interpretations of his writings." Platonism actually survived not in philosophy, Jäger writes, but "in mysticism, to be more accurate." He mentions Proclus, Plotinus, Evagrius, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa as examples of the tradition of Platonic mysticism, and in fact Jäger is absolutely right on all counts.¹⁵ What is more, Jäger is a contemporary exemplar of this tradition himself.

What distinguishes the tradition of Platonic mysticism, just as Jäger observes, is that "matter . . . only becomes reality through the timeless ideas manifested in it," that there is "no dividing gap between

God and the world, that the world is no less than the revelation of the divine,” and what is more, that salvation can be understood as “awakening to our actual essence.” Salvation, in this tradition, is realization of the divine.¹⁶ And the divine is not separate from us or from our world, nor could it be or we could not realize it for ourselves. These aspects of Platonic mysticism are its vital center, manifested above all in the transcendent illumination of consciousness that we may call a mystical breakthrough. This breakthrough is directly described in Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology* as the negation of all posited concepts, indeed of all sensory, bodily, or mental phenomena.

The broader medieval mystical tradition must be understood in this Dionysian context, which is to say, ultimately in a Platonic context. Some scholars claim that Dionysius is, in one aspect or another, not really Platonic, or that in some respects that he broke with Platonism. However, I have yet to discover where, in essential ways, such claims are entirely convincing. To give an example: Vladimir Lossky held, and others have accepted that Dionysius broke definitively with the Neoplatonic conception of hierarchy, as well as with the Neoplatonic emanationist cosmology. Perhaps this is so in both cases. But it is also true that Dionysius is author of *The Celestial Hierarchy* and of *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, neither of which can be said to repudiate concepts of hierarchy—quite the opposite. Lossky wants Dionysius to have refused to let Neoplatonic philosophy dominate the Christian mystery, and there might be some truth in this.¹⁷ But Platonism has its mysteries too, which were shared with Christianity through the works of Dionysius; in his work, Platonism and Christianity, and their mysteries, are fused.¹⁸ The genius of Dionysius was to accomplish this fusion in a way that preserves the mysteries of both.

What Dionysius provides is foundation for what is now known as the history of Christian mysticism, but in fact is a chapter in the history of Platonism—hence my term “Platonic mysticism.” In Dionysius we find the *ur*-formulation of kataphatic and apophatic mysticism—that is, the complementaries of ascent through images (*via positiva* or kataphatic mysticism), and of ascent through negation (*via negativa* or apophatic mysticism). Apophatic mysticism is, of course, essential because as the negation of all conceptual and perceptual attributions, it is the transcendence of ordinary or discursive consciousness, the sign and seal of this tradition of Platonic mysticism. It is central to the Platonic tradition as represented in Plotinus and Damascius, and

it is central to Dionysius's work as evidenced in his *Mystical Theology*, from which it then manifests throughout the subsequent history of Christian mysticism in such well-known and lesser-known figures as John Scotus Eriugena, Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Gallus, Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruysbroek, Johannes Tauler, Marguerite Porete, Jean Gerson, Nicholas of Cusa, the English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author of the *Theologia Germanica*, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno, Jacob Böhme, Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, Thomas Traherne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ralph Inge, Nicholas Berdyaev, Bernadette Roberts, and Willigis Jäger.

Platonic contextualization is so important because it reveals that the history of Christian mysticism is not one of discontinuity alone, but also of continuity. Often Christian mysticism is portrayed as discontinuous in its history, and of course there is some truth in this. For instance, it would seem that a figure like Eckhart emerges almost *ex nihilo*, and bears little or no links to his Platonic sources, let alone to Gnostic ones in antiquity. In fact, I coined the term “ahistorical continuity” in order to describe this phenomenon.¹⁹ But all the same, there is continuity in the history of mysticism, and it is provided by Platonic mysticism, in particular by the complementary unity of kataphatic and apophatic mysticism rooted in the Dionysian fusion of Platonism and Christianity, which opens space within the Christian tradition for a contemplative or gnostic path independent of specific doctrinal constructs.

What is more, the two complementary approaches of *via positiva* and *via negativa* allow us to see that types of mysticism often presented as fundamentally different—for instance, visionary mysticism as opposed to a mysticism of transcendence—can be seen as complementary and related to the extent that “behind” visions is the background of sheer transcendence of subject and object to which the vision is potentially an introduction. Of course, some visions might in fact be delusional, hallucinatory, or even deranged—attributable to the malign inspiration of the devil or to demons, to put it in religious rather than psychological terms. Nonetheless, what Dionysius provides is at least the possibility that both visionary and transcendent paths might be ascents toward the same ultimate transcendence of subject and object.

Dionysius's fusion of Platonic mysticism was channeled into Western Christianity through various figures, seminal among which

was John Scotus Eriugena. But Eriugena was far from alone in the effort to make Dionysius's work available in Western Europe. Dionysius's work, brought to the French monastery of Saint-Denis in 827, was translated by its Abbot, Hilduin, then translated again by John Scotus Eriugena, who went on to write his masterwork, *Periphyseon*, which is infused with Dionysian Platonism. Dionysius's work was translated anew by John of Sarracen and provided a commentary by Anastasius, a librarian in Paris; and the most essential work of Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, was translated and provided another set of glosses and commentary by Thomas Gallus and Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, again in the thirteenth century.²⁰

Among all of the authors inspired by Dionysius, however, one of the most important and instructive is Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), who in 1448 was given the title and position of cardinal in the Catholic Church by Pope Nicholas V. Since Nicholaus Cusanus (as he was known in Latin) was an influential member of the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy, a bishop and later cardinal, he clearly was not at odds with the Church. Nicholas's primary insight, expressed in different ways in his numerous written works, letters, and sermons, including his most well-known treatise, *De Docta Ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*), as well as works like *Idiota de Sapientia* (*The Layman [Idiot] on Wisdom*), *De Visione Dei* (*On the Vision of God*), or *De Apice Theoriae* (*The Apex of Contemplation*), was that transcendence is beyond our concepts, categories, or terms—it cannot be captured by them.

Hence Nicholas emphasizes a new *via*, beyond the *via positiva* and *via negativa*, the *via superexcellantiae*, or way of sheer or absolute transcendence. By it, Nicholas underscores the absolutely transcendent and incomprehensible nature of God, which cannot be grasped by human reason or perception. The divine nature is super-sensible, superintelligible, beyond all that we can characterize it as, even through superlatives. This *via superexcellantiae* is even beyond the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*).²¹ It requires us to engage in an intellectual, mystical leap, for “in sensible things we shall contemplate intellectual things,” and we ascend by a certain unproportionality from “transitory and fleeting temporality” “to eternity,” characterized by “a steadfast permanence of rest.”²²

Of course, there is a certain paradox here, for it would seem that the *via superexcellantiae*, with its assertion that mystical recognition of the divine takes place in the absence of both attribution (it

is x or it is *like* x: the kataphatic way) and refusal of attribution (it is not x or it is not like x: the apophatic way) is actually a different expression of the apophatic or negative way. In this light, the *via superexcellantiae* is really not other than the *via negativa*, expressed in a way that underscores its refusal of any conceptual or perceptual framework for illuminative or transcendent understanding.

Such transcendence is attained, Nicholas tells us, through “sacred ignorance,” meaning that God is ineffable, greater than anything expressible through words, and “as incomprehensible to creatures as infinite light is to darkness.”²³ In a letter to Cardinal Julian, Nicholas wrote about his personal experience of sacred ignorance, observing that only when returning “by sea from Greece,” he was offered a gift by “the Father of Lights” to “transcend those perennial truths that can be reached by reason.”²⁴ The letter makes clear, if it is not clear enough from the text, that Nicholas directly experienced that about which he wrote, and it is certainly significant that the experience took place on his return from Greece, home of Platonism.

What we find, when we dig more deeply into the history of mysticism, is that throughout is woven the red thread of Platonism, and in particular, of the sheer transcendence that is at the center of the work of Plotinus and of Damascius, as well as of Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology*. This is the key to understanding mysticism, whether it is in the work of Meister Eckhart, or Johannes Tauler, or for that matter, of poor Marguerite Porete, the author of the beautiful and uncompromising *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Forbidden to share her work or her mystical understanding, on 1 June 1310, condemned by the Inquisition as heretical, Marguerite was burned to death in Paris. And at the center of her work, just as at the center of Eckhart’s and Tauler’s for that matter, was the recognition that the illuminated soul “is nothing, for she sees her nothingness by means of the abundance of divine Understanding, which makes her nothing and places her in nothingness. And so she is all things. . . . without bottom. One does not find oneself who cannot attain this.”²⁵ In such passages we recognize, once again, the key: apophatic mysticism in the tradition of Dionysius.²⁶

It is worth reflecting for a moment on why Nicholas of Cusa could rise to the level of a cardinal in the church, while Marguerite Porete could be burned to death in Paris. Some authors see in her work a feminine, visionary mysticism interested in gender balance in the deity, and it is indeed probable that she was burned in part

because she was a woman mystic whose work challenged the Church's male hierarchy. Eckhart, Tauler, and Cusanus all tacked closer to orthodoxy than Marguerite, whose work in its espousal of mystical freedom implicitly does challenge the hierarchic authority of the Church and its doctrines. But at heart, her work was in many respects quite well aligned with that of other experiential mystical works in the English, French, and German traditions.²⁷ To put it succinctly, the individual inclinations and situations of mystics may put them on one side or the other of putative orthodoxy, but that does not affect their collective indebtedness to the Platonic-Dionysian tradition of apophatic mysticism.

When we turn to the tradition of English mysticism, we also find this profound indebtedness to the apophatic tradition, particularly in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In his preface to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Simon Tugwell situates this little treatise of advice on the contemplative path as squarely in the tradition of Proclus, Dionysius, and Eckhart, that is as Platonic. It is Platonic not explicitly, he writes, so much as in spirit. There is in us something that draws us higher, that pulls us inward, which Plato expressed in terms of the erotic ascent of the lover toward the divine beloved, and which the author of *The Cloud* expresses as the inner desire of the soul to be united with God. Tugwell writes that "the author of *The Cloud* is clearly dependent, however loosely, on the Platonist tradition that our minds are defeated when we try to draw close to God; only love can take the final step, drawing us into the dark yet dazzling mystery of God as he is in himself."²⁸ There are two aspects of the Platonic tradition visible in *The Cloud*, then: the attractive power of uniting with the divine, and the dark transcendence of the union itself.

Near the conclusion of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author exhorts us to "leave aside this everywhere and this everything, in exchange for this nowhere and this nothing." We should not care if our senses do not understand it, because in fact it is "so worthy a thing in itself" that sensory-based consciousness cannot recognize its inestimable value. It is dark seen from outside, but it is in truth an "abundance of spiritual light." Only the outward or exoteric man calls it nothing, for the inward or esoteric knower recognizes that it is in fact "All."²⁹ Embedded in this little treatise of direct contemplative advice is clear evidence of the Dionysian tradition, and in particular of how we are to transcend the realm of senses and objectifying discursive reason by our profound inner "work . . . in this nothing and this nowhere."³⁰

We are emphasizing the Platonic-Dionysian tradition in Christian mysticism in this brief survey not because it corresponds to all forms of mysticism, but because it has insufficiently been recognized to what extent this tradition exists within the history of Christian mysticism. It is obvious that *The Cloud of Unknowing* and related treatises of English mysticism offering advice to the contemplative practitioner owe their very existence to the prior tradition of Christian Platonism that is central to the Dionysian current. That Platonism more broadly is essential to the work and thought of many figures, including Ficino and Pico of the Italian Renaissance, is also obvious, but our purpose here is not to survey every single figure so much as to demonstrate the existence and explanatory importance of the Platonic-Dionysian current for understanding mysticism.

At first glance, it might seem that mysticism disappears around the beginning of what has become known as the modern era, but it was already dwindling by the seventeenth century and the rise of materialism, rationalism, and Cartesian dualism, well before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And indeed there is some truth to the view that mysticism not just wanes, but disappears with the onset of modernity. Nonetheless, there are major counterfigures to this tendency, and here I want to look at just a few of them. The first of these is the group known as the Cambridge Platonists, in England in the seventeenth century.

The Cambridge Platonists are sometimes mischaracterized; it is relatively rare for them to be placed in the category of mysticism. But it is by no means unheard of, and in fact, I would argue, that is where some, and perhaps most or even all of them belong. The group included Benjamin Whichcote (1609–1683), Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), Peter Sterry (1613–1672), John Smith (1618–1652), Nathaniel Culverwell (1619–1651), John Worthington (1618–1671), Anne Conway (1630–1679), and John Norris (1657–1711). But of the Cambridge Platonists, I would emphasize just two: Henry More (1614–1687) and John Smith (1618–1652). Without doubt many of these figures, but above all Henry More and John Smith, represent the intersection of Platonism and mysticism.

The Cambridge Platonists as a group represented an English Renaissance on their own, at least as much as earlier figures like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola represented and inspired an Italian Renaissance, that is, a strong reaffirmation of Platonism not just as if it were sterile analytical philosophical discourse, but as a lived reality. George Panichas described the Cambridge Platonists

this way: “Cambridge Platonism represents the quintessence of religious mysticism in the seventeenth century.”³¹ It was a “revival of the Greek spirit, especially as found in the thought of Plato and in the [N]eoplatonic thought of Plotinus.” Uninterested in mechanism or materialism, the Cambridge Platonists sought instead—despite living in an era of terrific religious “narrowness and bigotry”—“communion with the Mind of God.” They “sought to climb the spiritual ladder from earth to heaven” through “the purgative, illuminative, and unitive states of divine being.”³²

Henry More was the most mystical of the Cambridge Platonists precisely because he belonged to the Platonic-Plotinian tradition. More affirmed, directly against the emergence of modern materialism and atheism, the possibility of mystical union of the soul with God.³³ As Robert Crocker put it, “More, from the perspective of his mystical Platonism, believed that while most Christians were to a greater or lesser extent inspired by God in their thoughts and actions, the possibility of a real and substantial union between the soul and God (‘deification’) was the neglected cornerstone of orthodox theology.”³⁴ This union is possible because, as More put it in his *An Antidote Against Atheism*, “It remains therefore undeniable that there is an inseparable Idea of a Being absolutely Perfect ever residing, though not always acting, in the Soul of Man.”³⁵ More had experienced this for himself, and was, according to his early biographer, “once Ten Days together, nowhere (as he termed it), or in one continued fit of contemplation.”³⁶ More’s life, says Panichas, was “a long contemplation, a life of unbroken prayer.”³⁷

Another of the Cambridge Platonists who represents well the category of Platonic mystic was John Smith, about whom Frederick Powicke writes that he was a “spiritual genius.”³⁸ Smith too followed Plato and Plotinus, insisting that the “true metaphysical or contemplative man,” “abstracting himself from himself, endeavours the nearest union with the Divine essence that may be . . . knitting his own centre, if he have any, into the centre of Divine being.”³⁹ This union takes place through an inner leap, “shooting up above” one’s “logical or self-rational life.” Smith writes that attaining divine knowledge is best understood as coming not through “Verbal description” but through “Spiritual sensation.” He refers to Plotinus’s remark that the eye cannot perceive the sun unless it becomes sunlike (*Ennead* I.6.9) and remarks that likewise neither can man behold God unless he becomes godlike.⁴⁰

Smith, like More, was revered by his friends and colleagues as exemplary in his demeanor and conduct, but also as someone who had directly realized for himself that of which he wrote. It was said that More had had an illuminative experience that lasted ten days and that both he and Smith were renowned for their kindness and gentility. This corresponds to what Smith wrote in “The Excellency and Nobleness of True Religion,” that “the first Propertie and Effect of True Religion whereby it expresses its own Nobleness is this, That it widens and enlarges all the faculties of the Soul, and begets a true Ingenuity, Liberty, and Amplitude, the most free and Generous Spirit, in the Minds of Good men.”⁴¹ “True Religion,” he continues with the assurance of someone who knew this directly, “is indeed no Art, but an inward Nature that contains all the laws and measures of its motion within it self.”⁴² Smith’s is a Platonic Christian mysticism in which “[t]he nearer any Being comes to God, who is that Infinite fullness that fills all in all, the more vast and large and unbounded it is; as the further it slides from him, the more it is streightned and confined, as Plato has long since concluded.”⁴³

The Cambridge Platonists existed, after all, in a context of developing scientific materialism, but represented a full-on assault against materialism and in favor of religion as inner life. They also represented a clear alternative to confessionally based Protestantism of the time that could be quite puritanical, ideological, and antimystical. The Cambridge Platonists, and in particular More and Smith, demonstrate the possibility of a Platonic renaissance in the context of English Protestantism at the beginning of modernity, but they also demonstrate that Platonism could recur in many contexts. They spoke for an experiential path carried on by many thousands of souls in the Christian tradition.

After the Cambridge Platonists, arguably the most influential exponent of Platonic mysticism was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in his first book, *Nature*, asked, “[S]hould not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight, and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”⁴⁴ In other words, Emerson was asking, do we not have the faculty of direct insight ourselves? Why should we rely only on the insight of others, recorded in histories? In *Nature*, Emerson insists that we see ourselves in relation to nature and to the divine, *now*, and for ourselves, and that we not merely grope through the “dry bones of the past.” Nature here “refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf.” The

term “essences,” here, is reminiscent of Plato’s Forms or Ideas; and indeed Plato is visible throughout the work as a recurrent subtext.

But Emerson’s clearest manifestation of Platonic mysticism in *Nature* is the famous passage in which Emerson alludes to his “standing on bare ground” “uplifted into infinite space,” become a “transparent eyeball,” in which “I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”⁴⁵ Emerson also wants to remark on his “greatest delight” in the next paragraph, which manifests itself in “an occult relation between man and the vegetable.” For, he continues, “they nod to me and I to them.” And in the third paragraph, he remarks, “the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both.”⁴⁶

The last three sections of *Nature* are devoted to describing how we gain access to direct spiritual insight. The chapter “Idealism” outlines how “nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us.”⁴⁷ In “Spirit,” Emerson emphasizes the immediacy of transcendence. We can realize that

the highest is present to the soul of man, that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, through nature, spirit is present; that spirit is one and not compound; that spirit does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves. Therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old.⁴⁸

Emerson, he tells us, is pointing toward

The golden key
Which opes the palace of eternity.⁴⁹

This key is the “view” toward which he is pointing.

In the final chapter, “Prospects,” Emerson recapitulates his Platonic manifesto. He remarks that “the highest reason is always the

truest” and that the most refined truth may seem dim only because it resides deepest in the mind “among the eternal verities.” Empirical science in fact can “cloud the sight” because the categorizing, rationalistic faculty actually blocks out the “*metaphysics*” of nature, and “a certain occult recognition and sympathy.”⁵⁰

Emerson encourages us to awaken our higher reason, like a banished king who vaults at once into his throne. Hence he also refers to “Reason’s momentary grasp of the sceptre; the exertions of a power which exists not in time or space, but an instantaneous in-streaming causing power.” Reason is not rationality, but the faculty that perceives transcendence; it is the “king” that vaults at once into the throne of unity. At once, Emerson concludes, “shall we come to look at the world with new eyes.” With this realization, one enters a dominion “such as now is beyond [one’s] dream of God,” and with the wonder of a “blind man” who is gradually restored to “perfect sight.”⁵¹

Emerson’s Platonic mysticism is visible in his other works, as I detailed in *American Gurus* (2014). In particular, his famous essay “The Over-Soul” is about how time and eternity intersect, for “within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.” What is more, the soul is “not a faculty, but a light,” and “from within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.”⁵² Here, as in *Nature*, Emerson is asserting the transcendence of self and the recognition of Plotinian insight.

Here too, Emerson writes, “The soul’s advances are not made by gradation, such as can be represented by motion in a straight line; but rather by ascension of state. . . . The growths of genius are of a certain *total* character.”⁵³ In fact, “with each divine impulse the mind rends the thin rinds of the visible and finite, and comes out into eternity, and inspires and expires its air.” For “Omniscience flows into the intellect, and makes what we call genius.”⁵⁴ “Genius,” he writes, is not merely talent or intellectual gifts; “genius is religious.”

Emerson’s direct assertion of Platonic mysticism was precisely what incensed his critics. In “The Latest Form of Infidelity,” his response to Emerson’s *Divinity School Address*, Andrews Norton said, “I know of no absolute certainty beyond the limit of momentary consciousness; a certainty that vanishes the instant it exists, and is lost in the region of metaphysical doubt.” For someone like Norton,

“there can be no intuition, no direct perception of the truth of Christianity, no metaphysical certainty.” And another critic insisted censoriously “the doctrine that the mind possesses a faculty of intuitively discovering the truths of religion, is . . . utterly untenable.”⁵⁵ For “consciousness or intuition can inform us of nothing but what exists in our own minds.”⁵⁶

What we see in the sharp contrast between Emerson and his critics is the age-old opposition between Platonic mysticism and materialist dogmatism. This polarization is visible in the medieval era—one thinks of the Inquisition on the one side and figures such as Giordano Bruno on the other—but it becomes dominant in the modern era. Already in the period of the Cambridge Platonists it was emerging, becoming clearer in the time of Emerson, but by the late twentieth century, what B. Alan Wallace terms dogmatic scientific materialism had become the dominant mode of thought, so much so that Platonism and its modern offspring, Transcendentalism, by and large were eclipsed in the academic world. What incensed Andrews Norton about Emerson in the nineteenth century was no doubt profoundly irritating to scientific materialists of the late twentieth or twenty-first centuries as well: the assertion of the possibilities of direct spiritual insight.

Although Platonism as such largely disappeared from the surface of modern intellectual life, it remained alive underground, sometimes appearing in disguise. In academic philosophy departments, Plato and above all Neoplatonism were almost completely excluded in favor of analytical or other forms of philosophy that supremely privileged discursive reason while by and large dismissing out of hand religious or metaphysical traditions. In the broader Western intellectual world, Platonism was presented in bizarrely distorted forms, as “dualism,” or as nascent “totalitarianism,” but mostly was excluded and ignored. Still, because it is the core intellectual force behind and metaphysical context for understanding the West, Platonic mysticism did not disappear but appeared in new, sometimes altered forms.

One form it took, for instance, was in psychology, in the works and thought of Carl Jung. In *The Darkening Spirit*, David Tacey writes at length about the response to Carl Jung in the academic world. He draws on a term coined by John Carroll, “pneumaphobia,” by which he means a pathological fear of the spirit (Greek: *pneuma*). “The phobic response,” Tacey observes, “is evident in the knee-jerk responses to Jung as a ‘mystic’ or ‘religious’—terms that are seen as

abusive and damning.”⁵⁷ He goes on to write, “Critics who charged Jung with ‘mysticism’ were partly right, I believe, but underestimated the importance of the mystical in human experience and the development of consciousness.”⁵⁸

Jung’s work is not exactly in the tradition of Platonic mysticism, but it certainly was influenced by it. David Tacey refers to the “offence of the archetypes” as particularly egregious for many scholars and points out that Jung’s notion of archetypes owes more than a little to Platonic ideas or forms. Tacey points out that for Jung, “[a]rchetypes ‘in themselves’ are unknowable and regarded as transcendental factors . . . in the manner of Platonic ‘ideas.’” Jung thus represents, in his use of concepts like the “numinous” archetypes, “what Eliade calls a ‘new humanism,’ that is, one who restores a traditional view of the world and places spirit [in this case archetypes or Platonic ideas], not man, at the centre of things. The secular mind becomes phobic whenever its freedom is compromised.”⁵⁹

Jung’s work and thought contain many inventions and new aspects that were part of his life’s mission to recognize and understand psychological forces at work beneath the surface of an apparently placid modernity. His notion of the “unconscious,” his emphasis on dreams and on the forces at work in them, and his view of the ancient gods as living archetypes may indeed be offensive to a modern materialistic mindset, and if so, are so because they hark back to the Platonic and ancient religious traditions in which the gods were living realities. Among Jung’s insights was to see that when we do not recognize but suppress our inner life, its forces lash out, and hence we have the conflagrations of the early and mid twentieth century, the world wars.

Another such figure whose work can be better understood in light of Platonic mysticism is Mircea Eliade, who in the midtwentieth century was the dominant figure in the then-nascent field of religious studies. The extent to which Eliade’s work manifests a Platonic origin is not often recognized; his work, if taught at all, is typically taught as part of the history of the study of religion, but in isolation from his work’s Platonic precedent and origin. It became *de rigueur* to attack Eliade as an “essentialist” or to use an even more ridiculous term, a “religionist,” a “religionist” being anyone who takes seriously the philosophical and religious perspectives that he or she is studying.⁶⁰ But Eliade’s work does not exist on its own, separate from the Western philosophico-religious tradition; it is a continuation of it.

Eliade's model for religion emphasizes the timelessness at the center of religious experience. He was, as a young man, a practitioner of yoga in India, and he drew his mysticism from that experience and from the Platonic tradition. He makes this clear in a number of works, among them *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, where he outlines again how the purpose of religious life is to attain "to the Timeless," that is, to the "eternal present which preceded the temporal experience inaugurated by the 'fall' into human existence." "In other words," he continues, "it is possible, starting from any moment of temporal duration, to exhaust that duration by retracing its course to the source and so come out into the Timeless, into eternity. But that is to transcend the human condition and to regain the non-conditioned state, which preceded the fall into Time and the wheel of existences."⁶¹ What Eliade outlines here, and at many points in his work, is a lucid, very simplified theory of mysticism.

And Eliade makes clear that his theory of mysticism has Pythagorean and Platonic precedent. In particular, he refers to the Platonic tradition of *anamnesis*, that is, of remembering one's transcendent origins (literally, "not-forgetting"). Eliade writes that "it is in the Platonic doctrine of the Remembrance of impersonal realities that we find the most astonishing persistence of archaic thought." The Platonic "doctrine of Ideas," he continues, "renewed and re-valorized the archaic and universal myth of a fabulous, pleromatic *illud tempus*, which man has to remember if he is to know the *truth* and participate in *Being*."⁶² The italics are in the original. Eliade adds as a gloss, "In Plato it is only the pre-existence of the soul in the timeless universe of Ideas that matters; and the *truth* (*aletheia*) is the remembrance of that impersonal situation."⁶³

And Eliade does not conclude there. He refers instead to the modern inclination of academics, derived from a largely unconscious inheritance from Judaism and Christianity of materialistic historicism and a tyranny of linear time. Much in the vein of his colleague at the Eranos conferences, Henry Corbin, Eliade observes that the prevailing historicization of scholarship means that meaning and transcendence are often excluded; time is documented in detail, but timelessness, traditionally expressed through myth and ritual, is in the modern context often ignored. Eliade is mild in what he writes, compared certainly to his colleague Corbin's denunciation of secular historicism and insistence on the vital importance of transcendence and timelessness for what it means to be human.⁶⁴ And the key to recovering