

# Mysticism, Reform, and the Formation of Modernity

Princeton University, February 21-23, 2008

Location: [East Pyne Room 010](#)



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Was the European Reformation such a transformative event? The large division within most humanities disciplines between the pre- and post-Reformation periods establishes a false sense of complete difference between two eras. The transition was not experienced in such a drastic manner, and mystical literature, some or much of it attractive to some reformers and radical reformers, is a key area in which relationships of ‘continuity within transformation’ may be observed. This conference will explore the continuities between, for example, Lutheran reform of the sixteenth century and the Observant reform of the fifteenth century. It will also explore the mysticism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which fosters female participation in reform efforts, and its relationship to the increasing production and circulation of printed mystical and pious literature in the fifteenth century and beyond. How does mysticism address the major theologies of the reformed world: Lutheranism, Calvinism, Arminianism and Socinianism? What are the new roles played by mysticism in key social (including war, violence and toleration) and intellectual (including scientific) spheres after the early sixteenth-century? Considering these continuities, when can "modern" perspectives be said to emerge?

## **Registration:**

The conference is free and open to the public. Those planning to attend are kindly asked to pre-register by contacting the conference organizers:

[Sara S. Poor](mailto:spoor@princeton.edu): spoor(at)princeton.edu, (609) 258-7980 or [Nigel Smith](mailto:nsmith@princeton.edu): nsmith(at)princeton.edu

## **Conference Schedule:**

### **Thursday, February 21, 2007**

#### **5:00-6:15 Plenary 1**

Presider: Sara S. Poor, Princeton University

Niklaus Largier, University of California, Berkeley – Mysticism and Modernity: The Practices of Vernacular Hermeneutics, the Construction of a ‘Secular’ Realm, and the Place of Mysticism After Luther

#### **6:30-7:30 Opening Reception**

### **Friday, February 22, 2007**

#### **9:00-10:30 Panel 1**

Presider: Marina Brownlee, Princeton University

1. Alison Beach (William and Mary) – Visions of Community in the Hirsau Reform
2. Kirsten Christensen (Pacific Lutheran University) – Reform in Paradise: The Paradise of Loving Souls (1532) and the Mystical Renaissance in the Low Countries
3. Kees Schepers (University of Antwerp) – The Mystical Sermons from the Arnhem St. Agnes Convent: Continuity and Change in the Mystical Renaissance

#### **11:00-12:30 Panel 2:**

Presider: Jeffrey Dolven, Princeton University

1. Sarah Apetrei (Oxford University) – “Between the Rational and the Mystical”: The Inner Life of the Early English Enlightenment
2. Alison Shell (University of Durham) – Punishment and Perfectibility in Seventeenth-Century English Verse

3. Bethany Wiggin (University of Pennsylvania) – The Worlds of German-Pennsylvania Colonist Marie Christine Sauer (d. 1752)

**2:30-4:00 Panel 3:**

Presider: Nigel Smith, Princeton University

1. Arthur F. Marotti (Wayne State University) – Sainly Idiocy and Contemplative Empowerment: The Case of Dame Gertrude More
2. Genelle Gertz (Washington and Lee University) – Quaker Mysticism as the Return of the Medieval Repressed
3. David Wallace (University of Pennsylvania) – Female Enclosure and Travel in Carolingian London

**4:30-5:45 Plenary 2**

Presider: Peter Lake, Princeton University

Euan K. Cameron, Union Theological Seminary – Ways of Knowing in the pre- and post-Reformation

**6:00-7:00 Reception**

**Saturday, February 23, 2007**

**Panel 4: 10:00-11:00**

Presider: Christopher Heuer, Princeton University

1. Burkhard Dohm (University of Marburg) – Concepts of the Body and Female Spirituality in Baroque Mysticism
2. Hildegard Elisabeth Keller (University of Zurich) / Jeffrey Hamburger (Harvard University) – A Battle for Hearts and Minds: The Heart in Reformation Polemic

**Roundtable: 11:30-12:30**

Presider: Vance Smith, Princeton University

1. Nicholas Watson (Harvard University)
2. Amy Hollywood (Harvard Divinity)
3. Ulrike Strasser (University of California, Irvine)

**Conference Abstracts:**

**“Between the Rational and the Mystical”: The Inner Life of the Early English Enlightenment**

**Sarah Apetrei  
Keble College, Oxford**

In this paper, I will present mystical theology as a vital force in the early English Enlightenment, tracing its influence from the Platonist revival at Cambridge through to the mystical movements of the early eighteenth century. I will suggest that, far from representing a withdrawal from intellectual life and external affairs, mysticism created a space in which radically political ideas about religious epistemology, human subjectivity and the nature of God became possible. The paper will focus on the connections between three theologians of the later seventeenth-century who drew together the threads of mystical and rational discourses: the Quaker George Keith, the Anglican and Tory Mary Astell, and Richard Roach of the Philadelphian Society. Based on this analysis, I will argue that the same mystical currents which shaped radical religion after 1640 also shaped Anglican theology, and formed an important context for some of the major controversies of the early Enlightenment in England.

**“Visions of Community in the Hirsau Reform”**

**Alison I. Beach  
College of William & Mary**

The Hirsau Reform, a movement that emerged from the Benedictine monastery of Hirsau in Germany’s Black forest in the eleventh century and spread across German-speaking lands during the twelfth, was both a response to and a catalyst for social, spiritual, and ecclesiastical change. As monasteries joined Hirsau reforming circles, the social and religious networks in which each was situated expanded and grew significantly more complex. This increased complexity could trigger anxiety in nuns and monks, as it was frequently a catalyst for the redefinition and renegotiation of community identity. This paper will explore the role of visions of the dead and dying in texts associated with the Hirsau Reform, and argue that monastic authors recorded visions both to reassert old, and to express new, community identities. I will place particular emphasis on two manuscripts produced at the monastery of Petershausen following the community’s reform by a group of monks from Hirsau in 1086: a twelfth-century chronicle recording a number of visions experienced by the community’s monks and nuns, and a necrology, begun after 1156, whose layout and content reflect a different type of ‘vision’ of community.

“Ways of knowing in the pre- and post-Reformation”

Euan K Cameron  
Union Theological Seminary

Mysticism and the quest for mystical, intuitive illumination by the divine have never existed in isolation from other ways of knowing in Christian culture. At the end of the Middle Ages theologians were profoundly interested in the relationship between the different means of apprehending the divine. Tradition, reason, authoritative text, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit had their respective places. The Reformation debates disrupted this delicate balance between the different means to knowledge. In the controversies over Scripture, tradition and reason, personal illumination tended to lose credit. To Protestants it suggested a too familiar relationship between sinful humanity and God; for Catholics it threatened to disrupt the world of hierarchy and obedience that Trent had consolidated. To both it carried a suggestion of dangerous sectarianism.

Yet in the world of confessional orthodoxy, dominated by theological systems, creedal formulae, and pastoral discipline, intuitive reaching for the divine kept its place. This paper will reflect on the multiple trajectories that link late medieval and early modern religious epistemologies. It will explore the multiple pathways by which, after decades of dogmatic strife, the mystical instinct rediscovered itself in modernity.

**Reform in Paradise: *The Paradise of Loving Souls* (1532) and the Mystical Renaissance in the Low Countries**

**Kirsten M. Christensen**  
**Pacific Lutheran University**

*The Paradise of Loving Souls* (Dat Paradijs der lieffhavender sielen) was published anonymously in Ripuarian under the editorship of the Cologne Carthusians in 1532 and again in 1535 in Middle Dutch. This mystical-devotional text focuses on the life and passion of Christ as a pattern for “every one who desires to be unified with God.” Although this text has been almost entirely overlooked in scholarship, both its content and its context reveal the fascinating extent to which mysticism had become, by the sixteenth century, a powerful tool for reform both of familiar devotional material and of the spiritual life of the church. The Carthusians dedicated it to Arnold of Tongern, one of the theologians at the University of Cologne who responded to Luther before even Cologne’s own archbishop, and who was thus a powerful anti-protestant voice. *Paradise* is thus a significant component of the Carthusians’ decades-long efforts to publish mystical texts in the service of both personal and church reform.

The first two sections of *Paradise* comprise a series of meditations and prayers on the life and passion of Christ aimed at helping “good people” climb the ladder of perfection. The mystical influence of these sections is evident mostly in the appropriation of the long-

established trope of the multi-tiered pursuit of mystical union. There is a distinct shift in language and intensity in the third section, which is directed at “loving souls,” or those who have already achieved a certain degree of distance from the world and want now to “melt” and “sink” fully into God. Familiar nuptial mystical vocabulary swirls through each chapter, gradually intensifying to mirror the ecstasy of divine union.

Although *Paradise* was published anonymously, most of the limited scholarship has attributed it to the beguine author Maria van Hout, who wrote a somewhat similar text which the Carthusians published in 1531. I will discuss both stylistic and contextual arguments for and against this attribution. I will also discuss a recent discovery of a handwritten note in a copy of the 1532 edition of *Paradise* which indicates that another woman, Liesken Burcharß of Arnhem, “made” the book. Whether or not Burcharß authored or simply compiled or commissioned the compilation of her particular copy of *Paradise*, the connection of this book to Arnhem is significant, since we know it to have been a center of mystical-literary activity in this period. Indeed, two other widely-disseminated, woman-authored mystical texts from this period (*The Evangelical Pearl* and *The Temple of our Souls*) stem from an anonymous author from Arnhem’s St. Agnes convent. *The Paradise of Loving Souls* thus provides additional evidence of the vibrant exchange of mystical ideas and texts between the Rheinland and the Low Countries in the heady early days of confessionalism and thus of the importance of the mystical life as a tool for combatting heresy for individuals and communities.

### **Body Concepts and Female Spirituality in Baroque Mysticism and Pietism**

**Prof. Dr. Burkhard Dohm  
Marburg**

The presentation will deal with conceptualisations and interpretations of the body as a medium of spirituality in Baroque mysticism and Pietism. These concepts of body-focussing spirituality have been much neglected until now, but they are of central significance for research on an anthropology of ‘womanliness’ in the early modern period. Diverse currents of Baroque Mysticism and Pietism develop forms of female spirituality, focussing the body as an important medium of religious (self-)experience. In this context the range of body experience includes intensified sensibility and emotionality, cataleptic paralysation, anorexia, (visions of) stigmatisation, (real or imagined) self-injuries, and experiences of pain as well as extraordinary images and concepts of (self-)redemption. Such notions of the body are reflected by female writers of the 17th and early 18th century on high literary, theological, and philosophical levels.

To illustrate and discuss this phenomenon, my paper concentrates on three examples: the Austrian Baroque author Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, who is one of the most important meditative and mystical writers of the 17th century, the Neo-Platonic

philosopher and later ‘Quaker Lady’ Anne Conway, who was also influenced by the Jewish Kabbalah, and, finally, Johanna Eleonora Petersen-von Merlau, the most influential female author of Early German Pietism.

## **Quaker Mysticism as the Return of the Medieval Repressed**

**Genelle Gertz**

**Washington and Lee University**

I begin with an analysis of late medieval religious culture in England, arguing that it privileges prophetic authority, both in vernacular religious texts and in models of sainthood, especially the lives of female saints. I then consider the Reformation's seeming repression of this prophetic privilege, focusing on reformed conceptions of the Bible as the only source of revelation, and, in the context of lay response to scripture, Elizabeth's suppression of individual "prophesying" after sermons. I then move forward to the Interregnum, and the rise of sectarianism as well as the dissolution of the national church. I take up Quakerism's privileging of the Inner Light above scripture, what Geoffrey Nuttall identifies as the Puritan conception of the Holy Spirit separated from scripture, and revealed as the actual source of divinity rather than the text itself. Though Quakers' words derive from the Bible, they are understood to flow from God directly; they only sound like scripture because scripture has captured something of divinity. I then discuss to what extent the Quaker conception of prophetic authority returns to, or recovers, late medieval understandings of prophecy or revelation. Should Quakerism be seen as the correction of Puritanism's maniacal trust in *sola scriptura*, and thus a consequence of Puritanism, or does it in some way recapture late medieval openness to visionary experience, especially extra-biblical forms?

## **A Battle for Hearts and Minds: The Heart in Reformation Polemic**

**Hildegard Elisabeth Keller & Jeffrey F. Hamburger**

As part of their ongoing effort to define the proper place of images, not only in the church, but also in worship, medieval theologians repeatedly had recourse to imagery of the heart. Be it in theories of memory, imagination, devotional practice, or human physiology, the heart provided the place or space in which exterior imagery was interiorized. As a result, the trope of “painting the interior walls of the heart” became widespread in a variety of literary genres, from sermons to devotional tracts. It was, however, rarely, if ever, depicted, precisely because it defined images in immaterial, imaginary, internalized terms. This relationship between image and object, the inner and outer, the subjective and the objective, changes with the Reformation. Be it in the propaganda of proponents of Protestantism or the Counter-Reformation, in particular, that propagated by the Jesuits, exteriorized images of the heart proliferate. Our paper will

trace these transformations, using salient examples from medieval pastoral literature, Reformation polemic and the visual arts of the period, in particular, prints, such as those produced by the Wierix brothers in Antwerp, all in order to trace the complex dialectic that emerges, in which the heart as a storehouse of images becomes no less a battleground than the interior space of the church itself. Tracing the topos, “aus dem Herzen reissen,” according to which it is more important to purge the heart than the walls of images, provides a powerful instrument, not only to track changing attitudes towards images, but also the extent to which the arguments of Protestants and Catholics, far from representing polar opposites, subtly transform the way in which both sides thought both about -- and with -- images. In short, by looking at images of the body that represent images in the body, our paper, drawing on a combination of perspectives -- literary, art-historical, historical, theological and philosophical -- will examine a critical chapter in the history of “interiority” as it was constructed and cultivated in the Western mystical tradition, as a well as a critique of the concept of “interiority” as it has been used in the historical and critical discourse on mysticism.

**Mysticism and Modernity: The practices of vernacular hermeneutics, the construction of a 'secular' realm, and the place of mysticism after Luther**

**Niklaus Largier**  
**University of California, Berkeley**

In my paper I will discuss late medieval attempts to control the practices of vernacular mystical hermeneutics and Luther's efforts to frame acceptable practices of reading the scriptures in his writings against the radical reformers. Based on this, I will focus on forms in which mysticism informs 16th and 17th culture in ways that can be seen as both, a continuation and a break with the medieval tradition.

**“Saintly Idiocy and Contemplative Empowerment: The Case of Dame Gertrude More”**

**Arthur F. Marotti**  
**Wayne State University**

Great grand-daughter of Sir (or St.) Thomas More, Dame Gertrude (née Helen) More combined in her life as a nun both a rebellious and humbly submissive spirit, practical acumen and contemplative withdrawal from worldly preoccupations, saintly “idiocy” and intellectual rigor. The contemplative and mystical practices she learned from her spiritual mentor, the Benedictine Dom Augustine Baker, helped her resolve the contradictions in her life and empowered her devotionally in peculiarly Catholic ways. Examining both More’s own writings and Baker’s biography of her, this paper discusses her personal practices of contemplation and mystical devotion, found in the posthumously published

work, *The Spiritual Exercises of the most vertuous and religious D. Gertrude More . . . And Ideots Devotions* (Paris, 1658), in the context of English Catholic exile culture and the traditions of mystical writing by which her devotional practices were shaped.

### **The *Mystical Sermons* from the Arnhem St. Agnes Convent: Continuity & Change in the Mystical Renaissance**

**Kees Schepers  
University of Antwerp, Belgium**

#### *The Mystical sermons*

From the early sixteenth century on the St. Agnes convent in Arnhem developed into a centre of fervent mystical culture, firmly rooted in the works of the fourteenth-century Brabantine and Rhineland mystics Ruusbroec, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso. The original texts that sprung from this culture are characterized by a specific christocentric mysticism combined with a mystical understanding of the events of the liturgical year. The sudden re-emergence of mysticism in Arnhem and the surrounding Gelre region – strongly supported and stimulated by the Cologne Carthusians – has so far not been identified as a coherent phenomenon. However, it might justifiably be labelled a Mystical Renaissance.

A codex at the Royal Library in The Hague (133 H 13) contains 162 mystical sermons from the St. Agnes convent. It provides unparalleled access to the mystical culture these canonesses regular shared. This collection of *Mystical Sermons* remains virtually unstudied.

The *Sermons* attest to the shared objective of the sisters of the St. Agnes convent. They seek to experience the essence of human existence, which lies in its union with God. The sisters' single-minded desire is to attain mystical transformation in order to optimize, possibly experience, this connection with the eternal transcendence that is God. Self-annihilation, 'Abgeschiedenheit', cleansing of the mind and of the inner and outer senses, mystical reliving of the life of Christ, especially through the liturgy: these are key elements in their spiritual exercises.

#### Arnhem – Cologne cross-pollination

A single reference in the *Mystical Sermons* reveals the intimate, almost symbiotic relationship between the Cologne Carthusians and the Agnes convent. The sole contemporary author mentioned is Petrus Blomevenna (b. Leiden, 1466 – d. Cologne, 1536). The *Mystical Sermons* refer to him as 'the holy carthusian Peter of Leyden'. Blomevenna, prior of St. Barbara from 1506 until his death, transformed this Cologne charterhouse into a centre of religious reform in Germany. Not only did the Cologne Carthusians nourish the Arnhem mystical culture by providing the sisters with the inspirational writings they edited, wrote and published, they also published some of the original works from Arnhem, among which, most famously, *The Evangelical Pearl*

(numerous editions in Dutch and Latin from 1537 on). It is safe to say that the Arnhem sisters lived the spiritual life that the Carthusians promoted.

#### Continuity & Change

The Lutheran Reformation was only an indirect factor in the flowering of mystical culture in Arnhem. The immediate impetus was the Catholic Reformation, as stimulated by the Cologne Carthusians. This started well before the official Counter-Reformation, and was as much directed against the Protestant Reformation as aimed at internal renewal. It gave birth, not to modernity, but to a Mystical Renaissance based on a new-found connection with the classics of late-medieval Flemish and German mysticism. Subtle changes in the mystical language and spirituality of the sisters do, however, qualify this continuity. The peculiar mixture of old and new in the mysticism of the *Mystical Sermons* is comparable to that of *The Evangelical Pearl*. I intend to identify and discuss the specificity of this sixteenth century type of mysticism.

### **Punishment and Perfectibility in Seventeenth-Century English Verse**

**Alison Shell**  
**University of Durham**

The souls in Dante's *Purgatorio* are suffering harsh punishments, but are ecstatically happy. The notion of welcoming, indeed craving punishment for one's sins as a necessary preliminary to union with God pervades baroque religious discourse too. For obvious reasons, it has been found critically embarrassing and invited reductive psychosexual explanations: and one question this paper will be asking is whether one should retrospectively impose the concept of masochism on this period. The similarities and difference between Catholic and Protestant thought on this topic also deserve rehearsal. The notion that punishment worked to the good of the soul commanded cross-denominational agreement, as did the providentialist view that painful external events might be interpretable as an admonition from heaven, and welcomed as such. But the notion that self-inflicted punishment was meritorious was one particularly objected to by Protestants, primarily because it supported a soteriology of works rather than faith, and reinforced clericalist intervention in the penitential process. While Catholics would not have supported its indiscriminate use, there is a difference here which is partly to be explained by varying attitudes to the practice of confession: both between Catholicism and Protestantism, and within Protestantism. Even more crucially, any linkage of punishment and perfectibility was, *prima facie*, a this-worldly affair for the Protestant; for the Catholic, it could not be considered in isolation from the doctrine of purgatory.

Here, as in so many other respects, the abolition of purgatory left an imaginative gap in the Protestant religious literature of early modern England, often filled by denominational crossovers. For instance, Hermann Hugo's *Pia Desideria*, though a Jesuit production, achieved considerable mainstream success in England; allegorising the relationship

between Christ and the human soul, it explicitly affirms the idea that punishment can help one achieve greater intimacy with the divine. The mystical epic poem *Theophila*, by the mid-17th-century poet Edward Benlowes, will probably be the main focus of this paper, and shows another way of filling the lacuna. Born into a Catholic family, Benlowes converted from Catholicism as a young man, and thereafter spent much time railing against it. However, *Theophila* shows that his creative imagination continued to be inflected by Catholicism. As the poem's eponymous heroine ascends from glory to glory, she sloughs off her old self, often painfully. Conceptualising punishment as a necessary part of the refining process, the lower stages of Benlowes's heaven are a purgatory in all but name.

### "Female Enclosure and Travel in Seventeenth-Century London"

David Wallace  
University of Pennsylvania

One of the defining struggles in the *long durée* of professional religious women concerns enclosure. It had long been the declared aim, from the time of Boniface VIII, to see female professional religious securely enclosed: *o marito o muro*, as the saying went—a husband, or enclosing walls. In medieval centuries, women vigorously resisted such enforcement; the female cell remained, in many and various ways, open to communication with the local community and family networks. With the Counter-Reformation, however, enclosure was more strictly enforced—leading to the model popularized through dramas such as Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. This paper considers two Catholic Englishwomen of the earlier seventeenth century who strove to develop an active religious life while yet retaining the right to travel. Both of these women are associated with an area of London known as "little Rome": the southern end of Drury Lane, and the intersecting Strand.

### **The Worlds of German-Pennsylvania Colonist Marie Christine Sauer (d.1752)**

**Bethany Wiggin**  
**University of Pennsylvania**

"All peace around us was forced to wage war, and the elect host of virgins has conquered."

--Maria Eicher, "Wie so lang muß mein Gemüthe" ("How Long"), Hymn 98, *Libliche Lieder* (Ephrata, 1763).

Scholars have caught fleeting glimpses of Marie Christine Sauer (d.1752), also known as Sister Marcella, amidst the crossfire exchanged between two of colonial Greater Pennsylvania's most well-known German-speaking residents: her sometimes husband,

prominent Germantown printer Christoph Sauer (1695-1758), and her occasional spiritual leader, Conrad Beissel (1690-1768), founder of Ephrata cloister.

In 1720, the widowed Marie Christine married Christoph Sauer in the Palatinate, Germany. Four years later, the couple immigrated to Philadelphia with their three-year-old son, Christoph Sauer II (1721-1784). By 1726, the Sauer family had moved to a farm on the western frontier in Conestoga County, Pennsylvania, where they heard Beissel preach. In 1732, Marie Christine left her family to join Beissel's nascent community of religious celibates on the banks of Cocalico Creek, the settlement which became Ephrata cloister. Marie Christine's departure from her marriage added to a growing list of sexual scandals attached to Beissel's name by his many detractors.

Beissel taught a radical salvation history—inflected by readings of mystic Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) via editions by Johann Georg Gichtel (1638-1710)—which located humanity's redemption in its original divine androgyny. Celibate members of the community rejected marriage and strove to cultivate both their male and female sides by taming corporeal desires. In this community, Sister Marcella gained spiritual and administrative authority, leading important ritual practices such as the love feast and assisting the female celibates' *Abtissin*, Maria Eicher (1710-1784).

Despite her rejection of marriage, Marie Christine seems to have maintained cordial contact with Christoph Sauer, hosting him at a love feast she organized at the cloister in 1738. At this time, Christoph was also commissioned to print Beissel's hymnal, *Weyrauchs-Hügel*, an undertaking in which Marie Christine surely played a role. Yet, the two men soon quarreled viciously in print over the content of one particular hymn. To what extent the preacher's hold on Sauer's wife led the printer to charge Beissel with self-aggrandizement and to dub him the "Antichrist" is unknown. In 1744, shortly before Beissel and abbess Eicher restructured the celibate sisterhood, Marie Christine left Ephrata, first joining her son's household and soon reconciling with her husband. She died as a member of Christoph's household in Germantown in 1752.

Long obscured by the shadow of more famous men, Marie Christine's life occurred at the intersection of re-invigorated areas of scholarly inquiry: female religious authority and mystical experience in German radical Pietism, cultural transfer and encounter between religious radicals in the old and new worlds, and women's life worlds in colonial North America. Drawing on an array of manuscript and printed sources, this paper seeks to explore this nearly unknown early German colonist's mental and material universe.

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