WHY STUDY LITURGICAL MYSTICISM?

A HISTORICO-SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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Although liturgical mysticism, understood as a harmonious interaction between liturgy and mysticism, was a very familiar theme throughout Christian history, it is a rather uncommon phrase in contemporary theological scholarship.¹ The aim of this contribution is to re-introduce the notion of liturgical mysticism from the perspectives of both systematic theology and the history of theology. In adopting an interdisciplinary approach grounded in theology, we aim to revisit the concept of liturgical mysticism in order to contribute to developing an adequate interpretive model for mystical texts.

The first part of this article offers a brief systematic analysis of concepts involved in theological discussions on mysticism. The question of liturgical mysticism will be addressed by a systematic-theological analysis of Christian mystical experience, showing the uniqueness of that experience and the possible interconnections with liturgy. The second part entails a historical close-reading, especially of the sixteenth century Arnhem Mystical Sermons (abbreviated as AMS), as part of the Middle Dutch mystical tradition, in order to provide a solid historical basis for our argumentation. The third and the final part consolidates the insights gained from the previous sections. It explores first the impact of our findings on the theological understanding and method in the study of mysticism, and second it notes some ramifications for contemporary Christian spirituality. Approaches to mysticism have too often been one-sided: either the texts are read through universalistic lenses as a-historical, written by poets who transcended the boundaries of traditional religions, or mystics have been interpreted as context-determined theologians while scholarship excludes

¹ Even in the study of mysticism, the liturgy as ‘Sitz im Leben’ has hardly been referred to. See, Christoph Benke, ‘Mystik und Liturgie’, in Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie 125 (2003) 444.
the notion of a direct God-experience. In this article we will especially stress the ways in which mysticism is tradition-bound without excluding the concept of a direct and passive God-experience. We wish to take up the suggestion of the Flemish expert in medieval mysticism, Albert Deblaere, who, after having insisted on the passive and direct nature of God-experience, also remarked that “One day someone will have to establish a way of reading mystics that would not reduce their testimonies to a vague poetic lyricism beside the theological conceptual systems.” This article will attempt to show that liturgical mysticism, understood and practised as a tradition bound and context sensitive religious experience, is historically plausible and theologically promising.

1. A Systematic-Theological Analysis of Christian Mysticism

Mystical experience is a certain kind of experience. In order to understand the specificity of mystical experience, we need to identify its characteristics within a general structure of experience. Hence a simple analysis of the event of experience will be helpful. One can distinguish at least three integral aspects in any event of experience: (a) the one who experiences; (b) that which is experienced; and, (c) a certain relation between the one who experiences and the experienced. It is possible also to identify four essential features of experience: For the one undergoing it, an experience can be either active or passive; and the experienced can be either immediate or mediated. Using the three basic aspects and four essential features we may perhaps outline the generic structure of an event of experience as follows:

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3 Our analysis of experience here reflects Georg Gadamer’s analysis of the conversational game (See, George Gadamer, Truth and Method, New York, Seabury, 1975, 325-345); and, our choice to approach the event of experience through the intermediary experiential aspect is informed by David Tracy’s analysis of the problem of interpretation. See, David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, New York, Harper and Row, 1987, 10ff.
The relation between the experiencer and the experienced are characterised by different combinations of the four possible features of experiencing. The combinations, for instance, passive – immediate, or active – mediated, etc., can be differentiated from one another. In the case of mystical experience, the mystic as the experiencer relates to the mystery that unfolds for him/her. However, in order to account for the specificity of a mystical experience, we need to identify the precise combination of the features that characterise it. Recent studies in the field, when viewed in light of the structure above, seem to provide us with contrasting descriptions of mystical experience. While mainstream traditional scholarship maintains that the Christian mystics’ testimonies describe a passive, immediate experience, post-modern analysts, for instance the widely quoted British philosopher of religion Don Cupitt, argue that mystical experience is active and mediated. But texts from liturgical mystics seem to suggest that Christian mystical experience is more comprehensive than the recent intellectual circumscriptions of it. In order to bring out the importance of liturgical mystics for the study of Christian mysticism, we shall briefly examine the views in currency today.

According to Cupitt, mysticism originates in the narrative experience. In his reading, the mystics in all traditions not only distanced themselves from the institutionalised form of religions, which distort the original message of these religions, but also wrote against this institutionalisation and brought out a “condition of personal religious happiness” over against the tradition-mediated experience. He does not allow anything other than the narrative elements to constitute the experience and then identifies an unalloyed literary event as the

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7 Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity*, 61. In his view, the content of experience has to be understood as “a construct on the outer surface of language, and the world of mind as a construct on the inner surface of language” (7). Elsewhere he explains the implications of this perspective: “All knowledge is propositional, to such an extent that the very phrase ‘immediate knowledge’ – here marked on this page, a couple of signs, in black and white – looks to be self-refuting twice over” (60).
8 “Our great ‘world religions’ are (broadly speaking) religions of personal salvation. […] but as time went on and the faith became institutionalized, control of the community everywhere fell into the hands of a ruling group of religious professionals.[…] The religious life of the individual was now lived in subjection to a large and bureaucratic salvation machine, and personal experience of the highest religious happiness was deferred to the heavenly world after death. Thus, a faith-tradition that had originally delivered personal liberation now delivered only a condition of extreme religious alienation, and so it remains to this day.” Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity*, 3.
experiential aspect of all mystical phenomena. But, the crucial experiential aspect of an experience cannot be reduced to a mere language-game, with the experience and the experienced as mere players bound by the rules of the game. As we will show in the historical section, the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* state that a mystical experience is “more to experience than to pronounce.”

Each of the three aspects of experiencer, experience, and experienced has linguistic as well as extra-linguistic dimensions. Therefore, Cupitt’s reductive interpretation of experience as an exclusively linguistic event is as faulty as a transcendental reduction focused exclusively on the extra-linguistic dimension. Also, Cupitt’s view of mystical writings in all world religions as protests is untrue, at least in the Christian tradition. The majority of Christian mystics did not oppose their tradition, but on the contrary practised mysticism within Christianity’s institutional boundaries of doctrine, liturgy, community, and Scripture. Indeed, many were liturgical mystics, who (claim to have) experienced God in the course of their liturgical life. The tradition and the community to which one belongs therefore determine the reflection on the experience; they form the hermeneutical key. Again, while for Cupitt, “immediate experience,” is a “modern fiction,” the close-reading of mystical testimonies suggest something quite different based on a different anthropology, as we will also see in the second part.

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9 Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity*, 61: Mystics “in any canonical list,” are ‘wordsmiths’ who “do not offer us descriptions of language transcending experiences;” rather, they “convey their message […] by the way they play games with language.”

10 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 290ra. (see also footnote 104).

11 Here, one suspects that Cupitt follows a largely objectionable line of thought classically formulated by Schopenhauer who said; “we shall find that Sakyamuni and Meister Eckhart teach the same thing; only that the former dared to express his ideas plainly and positively, whereas Eckhart is obliged to clothe them in the garment of the Christian myth, and to adapt his expressions thereto.” (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, transl. by E. F. J. Payne, vol. 2, chapter 48).


Because God dwells within every person (since all are created in God’s image and therefore possess a fundamental connection with the Divine), it is legitimate to interpret mystical experience as a passive, immediate experience of the presence of God, which can arguably be present in many religious traditions. This contrasts sharply with Cupitt’s reading within which there is only an active (protest), mediated (through language) experience in any mystical phenomenon. In our reading, this view has two implications: first, since there is no distinction between experiential and mystical aspects, any experience can be interpreted as mystical, and moreover there can be no differentiation among mystical phenomena; and, second, such a view leaves no possibility of direct experience of God. A study of liturgical mystical texts resists such partial views. Liturgy is the fundamental locus and opportunity for a passive, immediate experience of God and the world around us; yet it includes rich possibilities for the active mediation of words and rites. Christian liturgical mysticism has neither been completely dependent on language and theology, nor completely independent from language and religion. If we can imagine liturgy as a comprehensive experiential zone in mystical phenomena, then we will be able to identify the functional role of language in the event of experience. In the complex of liturgical mystical experience, the ungraspable, which is experienced through immediate and passive aspects, is interpreted and integrated through harmonious inter-relations among the immediate-passive and the mediate-active aspects. In this sense, one can duly appreciate the role of mediation in liturgical mystical experience; yet we want to resist radicalising mediation at the expense of immediate experience, a radicalisation which in turn would rule out all possibilities of direct experience of God in liturgy. Liturgy will never fully encompass the possibilities of direct experience of God yet it is a sure home for experiencing God directly. Nevertheless, how the objective pole of the mystical experience, which is not dependent on the activities of the senses, remains organically related to liturgy is an important question. Although it is possible to bring out certain distinctions between mystical phenomena and liturgical experience, it is wrong to


He [Jesus] did not come in water alone, but in water and in blood. And it is the Spirit that bears him witness, for the Spirit is the truth. Thus, these three bear witness: Spirit, water and blood; and the three bear one witness’ (Jn 5:7-8). In light of John 19:35, this probably means that the believer who is baptized with water (into Christ’s death), and who believes in the efficacy of the blood of the Cross and receives it in the Eucharist, receives through those sacraments the gift of the Spirit, and recognizes that he owes his experience of the Spirit to the water and blood received with faith. Thus three things conspire to testify that his act of faith was right, and that the gospel which he believed was from God. If this interpretation is correct, John makes an intimate connection between mystical experience of the Spirit and the Baptismal and Eucharistic liturgy.\footnote{Vagaggini, Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy, 716-738; M. Smits van Waesberghe, ‘Liturgie und Mystische Gottesbegegnung im Altfränkischen Traktat “Den Tempel Onser Sielen”’, in Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie 91 (1969) 501-505.} In the patristic period, liturgy was perceived as a celebration of the mysteries of God that initiated believers into these same mysteries.\footnote{John Bligh, S.J., ‘Liturgical Mysticism’, in The Heythrop Journal 2 (1961) 344.} Basing themselves on history, early twentieth century analysts of Christian mysticism have theorised about the relationship between the two (mysticism and liturgy) on the actual
and the ideally possible levels of spiritual experience.\textsuperscript{21} Liturgy, in Stolz’s view, is a universally valid introduction to mystical life, particularly since liturgy is intended for all the faithful and not for any privileged group.\textsuperscript{22} It furnishes the foundation by which mystical life is made possible and on which it is built further. Theologically, one is the flipside of the other: “Liturgy and mysticism are simply two poles between which Christian life gravitates. Pure types are not to be found in Christianity.”\textsuperscript{23} This leads us to reflect on the ideal (and, indeed, really possible) interwovenness of liturgy and mysticism in the Christian faith and tradition: liturgy’s aim of perfect union with God can be attained in a special conscious degree through a quasi-mystical stage available in liturgical experience,\textsuperscript{24} though pure mystical union is clearly beyond the scope of liturgical experience, and may take place before, after, or even independently of liturgical celebrations. Having said this, we emphasise in contrast to Stolz that this interwovenness does not rule out the possibility of a mystical experience outside the Church and the liturgy.\textsuperscript{25} Rather, we intend to show that while interpreting mystical texts, the God-experience is always bound to particularities, and that in Christian mysticism the liturgy is a rich \textit{locus mysticus}, albeit not the only one. We shall come back to the methodological implications in the third part, after having established the interplay of liturgy and mysticism in the sixteenth century AMS.

\textsuperscript{21} For an overview of these currents, see Andia, ‘Mystique et Liturgie’, 69-74.

\textsuperscript{22} Anselm Stolz, ‘Mysticism as the Normal Flowering of the Sacramental Life’, in \textit{Orate Fratres} 17 (1943) 394.


\textsuperscript{24} Virgil Michel, ‘Mysticism and Normal Christianity: The Place of Liturgy in Mysticism,’’ in \textit{Orate Fratres} 13 (1939) 545-8. If the meaning of mysticism in its proper and strict sense is an experience of union with God, then it is legitimate to infer a real relation between mysticism and liturgy. Liturgical prayers, readings, and actions offer “abundant stimulation and aid on the way of mystical union” (See, Stolz, ‘Mysticism as the Normal Flowering of the Sacramental Life’, 393). According to Chrysostome Panfoeder, “all prayer and sacrifice of liturgy, like mysticism, have for their aim the purification of the soul, its illumination, and its union with God. Therefore, the liturgy seen in its totality can simply be termed mysticism” (Cited in Stolz, ‘Mysticism as the Normal Flowering of the Sacramental Life’, 393).

\textsuperscript{25} Stolz is right in affirming the crucial role of the liturgy in liturgical mysticism, but he is wrong in denying the existence of mysticism outside Christianity, when he states that there is no true mysticism outside the Church. (Anselm Stolz, \textit{Theologie der Mystik}, Regensburg, Friedrich Pustet, 1936, 75). Some authors have rightly pointed out this weakness in Stolz, see: Deblaere, ‘Christian Mystic Testimony’, 134; De Lubac, ‘Préface’, 16-21.
2. Liturgical Mysticism in the Sixteenth Century Middle Dutch Tradition

In the Middle Dutch tradition, the thirteenth century Hadewijch is one of the female mystics whose visions take place in the context of liturgical celebrations. She often describes her visions taking place during mass, and she indicates exact moments, for example, during the reading of the epistle.26 The content of her visions relates to the liturgical celebration, like the mystical reception of the Spirit on Pentecost.27 However, it is only in the sixteenth century that we find, around Arnhem in the province of Guelders, the Low Countries, such an elaborate form of liturgical mysticism, testified to in at least three texts. The first one is the Arnhem Mystical Sermons, a collection containing 162 mystical sermons, copied at the St. Agnes convent in Arnhem, around the middle of the sixteenth century,28 and two works which are likely to stem from the St. Agnes convent or its immediate spiritual environment,29 namely the The Temple of Our Soul, which contains 53 chapters of mystical treatises ordered according to the Cycle of Season of the liturgical year,30 and the

28 The most recent insights on dating the collection can be found in: Kees Schepers, ‘De historische verankering van het Sanctorale in de Arnhemse Mystieke Preken’, in Ons Geestelijk Erf 81 (2010). (forthcoming publication). A description of the collection can be found in Maria Sherwood-Smith and Patricia Stoop, Repertorium van Middelnederlandse preken in handschriften tot en met 1550 / Repertorium of Middle Dutch Sermons preserved in manuscripts from before 1550, Miscellanea Neerlandica, 29, Leuven, Peeters, 2003, 1079-1157.
29 A key argument for ascribing the Pearl and the Temple to St. Agnes or its immediate environment is the discovery that a unique textual witness of the Pearl (Manuscript Royal Library The Hague, 71 H 51) is to be ascribed to St. Agnes. See, Hans Kienhorst, ‘Meer mystiek uit het Arnhemse Agnietenklooster. De handschriften Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 71 H 51 en 133 H 13’, in Manuscripten en miniaturen. Studies aangeboden aan Anne S. Korteweg bij haar afscheid van de Koninklijke Bibliotheek, ed. Jos Biemans et al., Zutphen, Walburg, 2007, 212-213; Kees Schepers, ‘Het verborgen leven van de zusters Agnieten. Mystieke cultuur te Arnhem in de zestiende eeuw’, in Ons Geestelijk Erf 79 (2008), 295. Further arguments are the possibility that the Temple is written by the same author as the Pearl, and the strong thematic correspondences between the AMS and both the Pearl and the Temple. (Schepers, ‘Het verborgen leven van de zusters Agnieten’, 300-302.). A concrete textual comparison on the topic of the Christmas Liturgy, showing striking similarities, has been made by Rob Faesen: Rob Faesen, ‘The Three Births of Christ and the Christmas Liturgy in the Temple of Our Soul, the Evangelical Pearl and the Arnhem Mystical Sermons’, in Ons Geestelijk Erf 81 (2010). (forthcoming article).
Evangelical Pearl.\textsuperscript{31} This explicit systematisation of liturgy and mysticism’s connection was not self-evident. Starting in the twelfth century nominalistic paradigms arose which emphasised human individualism and freedom. The human individual and history were separated from the Divine presence, creating a gap between elements once integrated: between theology and history, between thinking and spirituality,\textsuperscript{32} and also between liturgy, theology, and spirituality.\textsuperscript{33} Though many mystics continued to emphasise the interconnectedness of the liturgy, theology, and spirituality, the AMS’ much more explicit elaboration suggests that the separation was stronger than ever in the sixteenth century. The sheer volume of other non-liturgical spiritual writings testify to this insight and show the originality of the AMS, the Pearl and the Temple.\textsuperscript{34} We will focus on the AMS because in them the whole liturgical year, both the Temporale and Sanctorale, the Cycle of Season and the Cycle of Saints, is linked with mysticism, which is quite unique in the Middle Dutch tradition. However, in order to understand the milieu of the AMS better, we will briefly outline the liturgical-mystical explorations of the Pearl and the Temple.
2.1 The Pearl and the Temple

One of the main themes of the *Pearl*, written by an anonymous woman (published 1537/1538)\(^{35}\) is the integration of the liturgy into the mystical ascent. The most explicit connection between liturgy and mysticism is made in Part three, chapter three, entitled: “How God wants to fulfill all the great feasts in the soul, and wants to renew them in her always.”\(^{36}\) The Church feasts, the celebration of the liturgy with the climax of the liturgical high feasts, thus ought to be celebrated interiorly: “All the other great feasts that were outwardly celebrated by me [= Jesus Christ] should also be fulfilled spiritually within you, for which reason they are all celebrated, so that you should constantly have and carry in your heart my whole life.”\(^{37}\) It is very clear, that the outer liturgy (here: the great feasts) is carried out with the aim that the feasts are “fulfilled spiritually within”\(^{38}\) the believers. This liturgy is a recollection of Jesus’ “whole life,”\(^{39}\) which is celebrated in the Church and represents Christ’s life again for the believers. The external liturgy is thus very strongly connected to the inner liturgy.

The fundamental theme of the *Temple* (1543) is that the human person is the temple of God, following Paul’s statement in his first letter to the Corinthians: “You are the temple of God.”\(^{40}\) Applying this analogy, it elaborates on the perfection of the exterior liturgy by celebrating the liturgical feasts in the inner temple of the human person. Chapter 8, entitled “How the Exterior Liturgy in the Holy Church is carried out for the sake of the Interior Liturgy,” summarises the principle of the inner realisation of the liturgy in the soul on the way to mystical union. Therefore, the *Temple* testifies to mystical-liturgical experi-

\(^{35}\) The *Pearl* soon became popular thanks to multiple, vernacular editions after its first publication in Antwerp between 1537 and 1538; through the Latin, French and German translations in particular it reached a wide international audience. (Helen Rolfson, ’The Evangelical Pearl, Part III’, in *Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Robert Faesen, and Helen Rolfson, New York/Mahwah, Paulist, 2008, 215.

\(^{36}\) ’Pearl Part III’, 222.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 222-223. Helen Rolfson’s translation has been slightly adapted here: the Middle Dutch *daer om sy al gheviert worden* is to be translated as “for which reason they are all celebrated” instead of “where they should be celebrated.”

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 223.

To integrate the liturgy into the mystical path, the *Temple* warns against merely celebrating the liturgy outwardly, but to attend the liturgy while being aware that the “high feast” takes actually place within the human person. The awareness of the inner, everlasting celebration is founded on a mystical anthropology, according to which God dwells within the person. This indwelling provides the opportunity for immediate contact between God and the person: “Indeed, consecration of the church is accomplished only in the most intimate part of the soul, in the same place that God has reserved for himself and united to himself [...].” The outer liturgy is meant to introduce an inner dedication to God: “The exterior temple is made for this inner temple. Everything that is disposed in it has no purpose other than to come to this inner temple, and all that is celebrated in it has no aim other than to be perfected in this inner temple.” The outer liturgy clearly reaches its perfection in the inner spirituality, and it simultaneously grounds the inner liturgy. The mystical union merges with the liturgical celebrations, but it is not temporally bound to it. Because of the presence of the Eternal God, the inner liturgy is continuously celebrated: “In that one [the exterior temple] the feast of the dedication of the Church is celebrated once a year, but in this one [the inner temple] the stational rite is ever celebrated, and there is ever the affluence of God’s riches and graces.” The exterior liturgy expresses what is experienced inwardly. It could be said, that the inner liturgy is the basso continuo for participation in the liturgy. In both the *Temple* and the *Pearl*, the exterior and interior liturgies are mutually dependent and integrated in a coherent whole.

### 2.2 The Arnhem Mystical Sermons

In this section we will focus on two sermons: first, the Easter sermon, which contains a general reflection on the value of intermediaries, one of which is the liturgy, in the mystical path; and second, the Church Dedication sermon.

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42 ‘The Temple of Our Soul (extracts)’, 328.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 329.


46 Ampe, ‘Inleiding’, 120-121.
which clearly connects the exterior rite with the inner mystical union with God.47

2.2.1 The Ambiguity of Liturgy as Intermediary

In the Easter sermon, the writer of the AMS comments on the relationship between the exterior liturgy and the inner liturgy, expressing in general the ambiguity of all intermediaries, and in particular the liturgy: on the one hand, intermediaries such as the liturgy are fully integrated in the mystical life and, on the other, the intermediaries can never fully encompass the mystical experience.48 The AMS point to the limitedness of intermediaries in the general appeal, “How should this letting go and releasing of all senses now proceed and how can one be bare of them?”49 This releasement aims at surpassing the realm of time and senses and to “go beyond all createdness by turning inwards into the eternal purity and truth of Jesus Christ:”50

When the inner person wants to turn inward into his innermost ground, then first of all the senses with all the “sensemakingness” encounter him, that is everything that the soul has ingested or received or kept in her through the senses or with the senses, be it outward or inward; outward [is that which] the person has ingested through seeing, hearing, speaking or reading or [inner is that] what the inner imagination or mind’s eye has received and remembered of God and spiritual things. These are all senses, and they are produced when the person desires to turn into God in a bare manner. Sometimes, they are very necessary and helpful for the person in turning inwards, and sometimes very damaging and hindering if the soul falls, together with the reason, with pleasure into the imageness and rests in it.51

47 The sermons are originally written in Middle Dutch. To date, four sermons have been published in English translation in: Kees Schepers, ‘Mystical Sermons’, in Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Rob Faesen, and Helen Rolfson, The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York/Mahwah, Paulist, 2008, 349-364. Ineke Cornet translated the other sections quoted in this article. The use of gender may seem inconsistent in English, but it is based on the Middle Dutch sermons. When referring to soul (f), the AMS speak about her. When referring in general to the human person (m), the AMS use his. We have opted to translate the personal nouns faithful to the original Middle Dutch, even though this translation is not gender-inclusive.

48 For a more extensive treatment of the harmony between the mediated and the immediate contact with God in Middle Dutch spirituality, see Guido de Baere, ‘Het “ghemeine leven” bij Ruusbroec en Geert Grote’, Ons Geestelijk Erf 52 (1985) 175-179.

49 AMS, Sermon 85, fol. 177ra. (Hoe sal dit afgaan ende verlaten alre synnen nu toegaen ende hoe machmen se ledich staen?).

50 AMS, Sermon 85, fol. 176vb. (aver te gaen alle geschapenheit mit een inkeren inder ewiger puerheit ende waerheit Jhesu Christi).

51 AMS, Sermon 85, fol. 177ra-rb: Wanneer sich die ynnige mensche tot sijnen binnensten gront inwerts keren wil, soe gemoet hem daer tyerst die synnen met al die synnemakicheit, dat is al dat die ziel doer die synnen of mit die synnen ingenamen of ontfangen of beholden heeft in hoer, het si
The intermediaries, mediating through the senses, are thus “very helpful and necessary” for creating the possibility of a mystical experience: the soul needs them as the means to turn inwards to the ground, one’s innermost being, where God indwells. The AMS indicate also the danger of an intermediary, namely when the soul “rests in it” “with pleasure,” namely when the intermediary is contemplated independent from the reality beyond it to which it points. Applied to the liturgy, this means that the external liturgy should not be perceived as a ‘closed’ system, but as something that points to a transcendent reality, namely the inner liturgy:

But when they [= the senses] bring into the person the feasts and great feasts of the Church, and the soul turns herself with them or through them bare to God in the spirit, in which all great feasts are truly renewed and celebrated by God, then the senses and imaginations are necessary and good unto this moment, in so far they lead the soul into and point towards the truth of the great feasts in the spirit. Therefore, one should enjoy the ingestings of the senses and her imaginations of the feast not more than for the introduction into or indication of the truth.

The exterior liturgical celebrations are intermediaries, and “with them or through them” the soul may turn inwards to God. Liturgical celebrations have the capacity “to lead the soul into and point towards the truth of the

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53 Cf. the tension and harmony between contemplation with and without images in Geert Grote: Baere, ‘Het ghemeine leven’, 176-177.

54 AMS, Sermon 85, fol. 177rb-va. (Mer wanneer se den mensche inbrengen die festen ende hoechtijden der kercken, ende die ziel hoer daer mede of daer doer bloet tot god inden geest keert daer alle hoechtijden van god waerick in vernyet ende begaen worden, soe sijn die synnen ende verbeeldingen tot dier stont toe noetdorftich ende guet, soe veer si die ziel leyden ende wijsen tot die waerheit der hoechtijden inden geest. Daer om en salmen die innemingen der synnen ende hoer ver-

55 AMS, Sermon 85, fol. 177rb.
great feasts in the spirit.” Participation in liturgy is a \textit{locus mysticus} because the liturgy itself points towards the mystical union. Thus in no way is liturgy opposed to mystical experiences. However, though the inner liturgy is connected to the intermediated, they do not coincide. Just as in the \textit{Temple}, the mystical anthropology of divine indwelling itself is foundational for the inner liturgy. Within the spirit, the liturgy is celebrated by God Himself without intermediaries: ”all great feasts are truly renewed and celebrated by God” in the spirit. The awareness of the inner liturgy creates a deep appreciation for the parallel exterior liturgy and yet prevents an overvaluation of the mere external liturgy, since the external is not meant for anything except “the introduction or indication of the truth.” The ambiguity of the liturgy’s role implies that the universal aspects of the immediate God-experience in the spirit are thus never independent from the particular mediation. In the words of Guido de Baere: in mystical union, an intermediary is “radically broken through” and yet “preserved;” it is “not destroyed but [it becomes] fully transparent to the imagined reality.” Again, this points to the crucial interconnectedness of the mediated and the immediate necessary to interpreting mystical testimonies. The connection of mysticism in the \textit{AMS} with the whole liturgical year encourages a lifestyle in which the rhythm of the whole liturgical year is integrated into one’s life.

2.2.2 \textit{Outer and Inner Liturgy on the Feast of the Church Dedication}

Sermon 128, on the dedication of the Church, is a concrete example of the interwovenness of the exterior liturgy and inner mystical union. Many elements refer to the rite of Church Dedication, the general medieval structure of which can be briefly outlined as follows. The rite starts when the bishop and the community gather outside, at dawn, while the litany is sung and twelve candles are lit, and they walk three circuits around the Church, during which the outer walls are purified by sprinkling them with holy water. After entering the Church, the bishop signs in dust on the floor crosswise the ABCdarium, alphabets referring to Christ, symbolising Christ declaring the Church as His...
The altar and the inner walls are also purified with holy water and by marking them with twelve dedication crosses and lighting twelve candles in front of them. After the altar is consecrated with oil, marking it with signs of the cross and burning incense, the relics are carried into the Church. Holy mass concludes the rite. The sermon opens with designating the yearly celebration of the Church dedication as an occasion to perform the dedication of the soul, based on the commonly accepted medieval concept of the soul as God’s inner Church: “On the solemn day of the Church dedication, a faithful, inner soul should turn inwards earnestly, and observe the temple of her soul, which the Lord has purified and adorned with Himself: how it is now polluted and vitiated with sins and bad desires.” The full rite of Church dedication was only performed once for any given Church. Yet, the yearly celebration of the Church dedication consists in a special Eucharistic celebration with adapted readings and antiphons. The sermon, in an explicit way, mystically applies elements of the dedication rite, which could have taken place during the original dedication rite or during the yearly commemoration. Thus, liturgy as locus mysticus does consist in both the commemoration of an earlier liturgical rite and the liturgical act of that day, showing that mystical union is connected to the liturgy but not temporality bound to it.

The sermons starts with designating the soul as temple of God, which expresses that God indwells within the human person. The indwelling of God requires a response of the human person. God wants the human person to keep the

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65 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 286rb. (Opent hoegen kerwijngen dach soe sal een getrouwe, ynnige ziel neernestelick in hoer selven gaen ende besien den tempel hoere zielen aen, die die hier mit sich selven gereynicht ende vercyert heeft: hoe die nu bevelckt ende ontreynt is mit sunden ende boese genoechten.)
temple holy and pure, instead of “polluted and vitiated with sins and bad desires.” Hence the ascent towards the full loving union with God in the spirit requires a full dedication of oneself to God. This ascent entails three stages in the sermon: the outer temple, the inner temple with middle choir and high choir, and the innermost of the inner temple, the *sancta sanctorum*, a division which is quite common in late medieval mysticism. Behind this structure is a basic division of human nature into two levels. On the highest level, the soul indwells in God and God in the soul; here all faculties are not engaged in activity, but turned inwards. On the level of active existence, the Pauline tripartite structure of higher powers (spirit) and lower powers (soul) and the senses (body) is applied. Note that the highest level thus has two sides: in its passive side, it indwells in God; in its active dimension, it unfolds into the higher powers. Thus, the anthropological location for the mystical union, the spirit, which in its passivity has universal elements, is inseparably connected to the unity of the active levels which particularise the human person. The levels can be distinguished, but not separated, as the mystic Ruusbroec expresses: these levels exist “as one life and as one kingdom.”

The ‘outer temple,’ the “walls, windows and floors” are to be cleansed first. This is explained as the purification of the “outer senses”, the “outer members” and the “heart” of all bad intentions and volitions, till “the outer temple of her body is purified and adorned with the complete perfect holiness of Jesus Christ.” The inner temple consists, parallel to the twelve dedication crosses on the wall made by the “highest and most true bishop of the soul,”

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69 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 286rb.
74 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 286rb-287rb.
75 Cf. *uutterlicker synnen, uutterlicke litmaten, herte* (AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 286rb-287rb).
76 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 287ra. (Aldus is dan den uutwendigen tempel hoers lichams gereynicht ende vercyert mit al die volcoemen heilichet Christi Ihesu).
77 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 287va. (den aversten gewaren bisschop der zielen).
in twelve faculties, located in the middle choir and the high choir. The high choir, the spirit, encompasses six more passive faculties: the faculties of mind, intelligence, and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The middle choir, the soul, entails the six more active counterparts, namely remembering, understanding, volition, desiring, distinguishing, and lastly hating or loving. Whereas Christ impresses these crosses on the person, the person responds to Him by lighting the candles, which is “the replicating, shining and blazing of Himself in her.” Christ then can contemplate Himself within the human person, because His purity is present there. After the enlightenment of all the faculties, the marking of the floor with a big cross connects activities like singing hymns with more inward experiences like the loving enjoyments between Christ and the soul. Thus the exterior liturgy in no way hinders the parallel internal unity with God, as the following quotation expresses:

[S]he takes, with the arms of her desiring love all the devotional inner practice, the reverence, the praise and hymns, together with all the most divine inworkings, the most sweet embraces and the most direct, most loving enjoyments of the spirit and the soul of Christ, like the most attractive, unwithering palms and with these she envelopes and decorates her cross – that means her faculties, from the highest till the lowest [...].

The third level is the “highest and innermost choir,” the “sancta sanctorum,” where the “altar of love stands” in the “highest part of the spirit.” Parallel to the liturgy in which the altar is the “focal point” and “heart” of the rite, the focal point of the person is the “altar of love.” The altar is approached by turning inwards: The person adorns the altar with the “bareness” and “empti-

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80 *AMS*, Sermon 128, fol. 287rb. (soe neemt si noch daer toe met die armen hoere begerlicker mynnen alle die goddyenstige ynnichiet, eringen, danckinge ende lavingen, mit al die godlicste inwerckinge ende zuieste omhelsingem ende onmyddellicste, mynlicste gebruckingen des geests ende der zielen Christi, voer die alre genoechlicste, onverdorlicste palmen, ende omset ende verificaer daer mede hoer cruken – dat sijn hoer crachten, die hoechsten mit die leechsten – [...]).

81 *AMS*, Sermon 128, fol. 289ra. (hoechste ende ynnichste choer [...] *sancta sanctorum*, daer dat hoechste ende genoechlichesten altaer der mynnen in state [...] hoechste hoers geests [...]).

82 The centrality of the altar is also outlined in Horie, *Medieval Dedication Sermons*, 8.
ness" that she receives from Christ’s spirit. The focus shifts slowly to the person’s passive dimensions:

After all these activities, preparations, washing and decoration, praise of organ playing, the raising of the voices, offerings, praises, which, like in a flash, in a sweet melting, bring together and combine in Christ Jesus the affections and soul’s faculties, originates immediately a miraculous, divine tranquillity in the soul, and she is completely robbed of herself by God.

Though one can prepare oneself for the God-experience, the divine tranquillity which widens the consciousness beyond the self, is ultimately given by God Himself: the person “is completely robbed of herself by God.” The mystical experience is a passive experience, taking place during a God-given, “divine tranquillity.” At the same time, this passivity is not opposed to the activities. The whole sermon leads towards the climax on the altar where the mystical union is going to take place. The liturgical rite does not immediately start with the Sacrifice on the altar, and so the way towards the passive, mystical union is usually paved through the active and mediated, leading us to value the particular highly. The activities of the person, here the liturgical participation and the growing in holiness, are organically interwoven with mystical life: they bring the whole person into such a state that every faculty and sense of the person becomes united and the person as a whole becomes receptive to God. The passive receptive side is part of the one and the same spirit that unfolds itself in activities. Thus, as Deblaere pointed out, the passive God-experience is at the same time a “passive activation” of the whole human person, because the faculties are gushed “from the inside,” causing a transformation. This integrity of the human person, which in our view needs to be even more articulated, necessitates the integral reading of mystical testimonies, combining both the passive and direct as well as the active and mediate parts.

The mystical union is expressed in Eucharistic language: “And in this tranquillity, the Personal, Eternal Word comes and performs the high sacrifice in the soul, and sacrifices Himself in her, and with her in Him melted and

84 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 289ra-289rb.
85 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 289va. (Nae al dese werckelicheiden, bereydingen, wassinge ende vercyeringen, orgellavinge, stemmen verheffinge, offeringen ende dancken, die die affectien ende crachten der zielen mit een zuete versmeltinge in enen snellen blick onder een doen ende hebben in Christo Ihesu, soe wort terstont een wonderlicke, godlicke stillinge inder zielen, ende si wort hoers selves als te mael beroeft van God.).
86 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 289va.
87 Deblaere, ‘Christian Mystic Testimony’, 140.
united with the Father in the Godhead, as an eternal pleasure and enjoyment of His love.” The coming of Christ as priest to the altar in the soul’s temple is parallel to the coming of the priest to the altar in order to perform the sacrifice. In the priest-centred medieval holy mass, the priestly performance was of utmost importance. The union between the person and Christ is the ‘inner liturgy’ of the sacramental communion with Christ. This spiritual unity of Christ with His Church is the actual aim of the sacramental rite. Quite a few mystics regarded the Eucharist as the sacrament instituted for the purpose of union with Christ. Again, this suggests that the active and mediated part of the liturgy can be interwoven with mystical union. The sacramental and inner participation in the Eucharist unites the person with Christ so intensely that the human person can be lifted up into the divine reality. S/he becomes a son of the Father, so that s/he is loved with the same love as the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father:

Through this sacrifice of the Eternal Word, the soul’s form is transformed and made one with God’s form, and the loving Son of God presents this form in His own unity to the Father and the whole heavenly host, and the Father in the Godhead delights Himself in this soul’s form in the Son and that of the Son in the soul, […] and how and what happens there to the soul, that is more to experience than to pronounce.

The sermon clearly states that mystical experience transcends linguistic and intellectual categories. It is primarily a unity of love; the written or linguistic reflection is here only a secondary move, which seems to contrast with Cupit’s “mysticism of secondariness.” The full union of love unites the person and God so much that the human person is deified: the “soul’s form is transformed and made one with God’s form.” The human person participates in the divine life, a doctrine spoken of not only in the Eastern but also in the Western Chris-
tian tradition. This deifying effect of union with God during liturgy testifies to liturgical mysticism as affecting the whole human person and is thus far from a merely exterior rite. The sermon makes also clear that not everyone who dedicates himself to God and is united with God will have a mystical experience. Sometimes the liturgy may introduce a mystical experience of that unity, but mostly it fortifies the union between Christ and the believer, strengthening that person in the loving relationship with God and a holy life. What really matters is to have the “releasement of the will in the eternal will of God.” To anyone who attends the Eucharist in this way, the deifying union “is worked by God within him as true in the darkness and unknowing as it happened ever with divine experiencing in any godloving person.”

The specificity of Christian mystical experience is very obvious in this sermon: it is a complete union with Jesus Christ, both liturgical-sacramental and interior, and in Him being one with the Father. Though the immediate God-experience is a phenomenon that has universal characteristics and cannot be fully grasped by mediation, it is at the same time strongly connected to the active and mediated, here the liturgy. It suffices to mention here that this observation urges for an interpretive model within which the active and passive, the mediated and the immediate are combined, although much more could be remarked about it from the perspective of liturgical theology. These medieval sermons testify to the passive, more universal aspects as never negating the particular, but the Christian particularity plays a crucial role for the Christian mystical experience.

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95 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 290ra.

96 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 291ra-rb. (laten des willen inden ewigen wil Gods)

97 AMS, Sermon 128, fol. 290ra-rb. (het geschiet in hem van God soe gewaerichlick inder duysternisse ende onbekentheid alst ye in enich godmynnent mensche geschiet is mit godlicken bevijden.).

98 In the light of the current attempts to establish a reading method, it is noteworthy to mention that McGinn points out that modern readers too often interpret medieval mysticism as a “private aspect of religion,” whereas medieval mystical preachers proclaimed the mystical dimension of the pericopes of the Church calendar. See McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500), 330-331.
3. Historico-Systematic Conclusions

In the previous section, we showed that the testimonies of sixteenth century liturgical mystics establish that mysticism does organically – though not automatically – flower from within liturgical life. Recovering part of the true spirit of the liturgy through the mystical openings it provides has an important impact on theological understanding and method.

As noted earlier, liturgy is a comprehensive experiential zone: While it offers rare opportunities for passive, immediate experience of God, it also includes rich possibilities for the active mediation of words and rites. This complex matrix not only reveals the open structure of mystical experience, but also illuminates both the constitution of the human person (who, as a mystic, may have such experiences) and the method for understanding mystical phenomena.

In our view, the active and mediated should always be thought together with the passive and the direct. The foundation for the never-ending interaction between passive and active, immediate and mediated, is the distinct anthropology that emphasises the unity of the human person. The indwelling of God, as the locus for God-experience within the person, is the passive and universal side of the human spirit. However, this is never separated from the person’s active life. The spirit on the one hand unfolds itself into the higher powers, the lower faculties and the bodily senses, and, on the other, she draws into herself these active faculties.99 In fact, all levels of the human person flow together into one life.100 Ruusbroec, one of the sources of the *AMS*,101 expresses this in a very distilled way: “You should know that all our feeling is divided into three, that is, in a sensory feeling and in a rational feeling and in a divine feeling. And when these three come together in one life, there is great well-being in the netherfeeling, splendour and richness and more well-being in the centremost feeling, divine enjoyment and joy and richness without measure.

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100 Cf. Ruusbroec’s anthropology: Mommaers and Bragt, *Ruusbroec in gesprek met het Oosten*, 150.

in the highest feeling.” This quotation highlights that mystical experience (divine feeling) is supposed to be integrated within the whole human person. There cannot be one universal type of experience; the experience will always be related to the particularities of the human person.

For liturgical mystics, the liturgy provided good ways to integrate mystical experiences into the whole of life. First, the exterior liturgy introduces the awareness of God’s indwelling and points out the possibility of union between God and humans. It invites them to a deeper awareness of the mysteries celebrated and arouses a strong impulse to open themselves to experiencing God. Second, the liturgy provides symbols, words and acts to interpret the mystical experience, which is ungraspable, so then the experience can connect to or join with the person’s intellectual and sensual realms. Third, liturgy, with its constant and stable rhythm, provides the possibility for integrating mystical experiences, which are momentary and usually rare. The strong interconnectedness between liturgy and mysticism allows us to speak about liturgical mysticism and mystagogical liturgy.

However, there is a danger here in too strongly identifying liturgy with mysticism. They each have their respective domains. Mystical experiences are related to liturgy but are neither temporally nor causally bound to it. Not every liturgical act leads to a mystical experience for every participant; and mystical experiences can take place outside Christian liturgy anywhere in the universe because God indwells within every human being. This latter point does not mean that there is a universal mysticism over and above the tradition-bound experiences; experience is always related to the particularities constitutive of the integral human person. Said another way: Divine indwelling is the universal condition for the possibility of mystical experience. While all instances of mystical experience presuppose this universal condition, the content and import of each experience are coloured by the particularities of each mystic. The difficult crux in studying mysticism centers on this strange overlap of such conditions and the particular actualisations in the mystics’ lives in their specific religious context. The strange overlapping of the condition for mystical experiences with its own content is the essential difficulty in studying mysticism. There may be some real resemblances in different mystics’ ways of experiencing the divine-indwelling and yet some stark differences in

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103 De Andia speaks in the same way about “mystique sacramentaire” and “liturgie mystagogique.” See Andia, ‘Mystique et Liturgie’, 59.
the details of their experience and the articulations thereof. But neither these resemblances nor the differences are non-interpretive, a-historical essences. The distinctions we bring out between content and condition or between universal and particular in a mystical experience are not strictly substantial, but hermeneutical. What is called for is a historical-hermeneutical examination. We need a very synthetic hermeneutical method that allows the inquirer to distinguish and to integrate the condition and content (universal and particular) in order to understand mystical phenomena adequately.

Christian mystical experience is not exclusively a liturgical experience, and much less can it be reduced to a ritual experience within a liturgical celebration. All the same, it is an experience accessible through the words, rites, and referential meanings of the liturgical event. The AMS affirm that Christian liturgy enhances spiritual growth and union with God, accompanied by mystical experiences or not. The mystics testify to a harmony between liturgy (tradition-bound experience) and spirituality (experience’s universal condition of the possibility), which they themselves experienced on the deepest possible level, and we now understand interpretatively. It is our conviction that this interwovenness, which is both theologically valuable and historically substantiated, provides the tools for integrating tradition-bound liturgies with the contemporary quest for religious experience.

In the Western world, where the impact of post-modernity is more apparent and acknowledged than in the other parts of the world, a significant shift has already occurred: a movement away from the traditional forms of religious beliefs and practices to more trans-religious forms of spiritual worldviews and practices. This shift in religiososity has both an intellectual and an economic side. The intellectual element arises from post-modern critiques of totalising regimes and from the fresh efforts to re-assert the value of particulars over universals and difference over sameness; the economic element arises from the commoditisation of religion in the contemporary global market. For Christian communities, this shift results in the emergence of a certain “unchurched spirituality.” Two characteristics of the new trend are an eclectic integra-


105 For a systematic account of the post-modern context in the light of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s analysis, and Western Christianity’s reactions to these changes in religious context, see Lieven Boeve, Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context, Leuven, Peeters, 2003, chapters 3 and 4.

tion of different religious traditions and a certain ‘privatised’ spirituality often without congregations and/or creeds. Based on the previous sections, we would like to propose that in response to this situation, the Church, often searching for its own identity, becomes more aware of personal experiences of transcendence within the frame of the liturgy, a dynamic to which many liturgical mystics in the past have testified. We strongly recommend further research in the fields of liturgy and pastoral theology in order to elaborate on the implications of liturgical mysticism.

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