

The Mystics Who Came to Dinner

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Introduction

In 1141, the Rhineland abbess Hildegard of Bingen was overcome by a barrage of bright lights that flickered wildly in front of her eyes, gradually spreading a terrible pain throughout her head before coalescing into a dance of visions that shone with vibrant colors and multi-dimensional shapes.

Two and a half centuries later, in the east of England, the thirty-year-old Julian of Norwich was also transfixed by bright lights in the form of a beam of radiance that focused on the suddenly vivified figure of a dying Jesus Christ on the cross.

Not long afterwards, and not far from Norwich in the English market town of Bishop's Lynn, Margery Kempe, mother of a newborn baby, experienced the extreme upheaval of being unable to carry on with her home life because she was beset by terrifying demonic visions that only ceased when Jesus appeared to her. Not many years before Margery's upheaval, in the English midlands, the unknown man who would write *The Cloud of Unknowing* was settling into his contemplative life that he lived "between two clouds," while around the same time in England's Yorkshire area, the young Richard Rolle had stripped off his own clothes, donned his sister's tunic and his father's rain hood, and fled to the

Introduction

woods to live as a solitary hermit. Much earlier, in twelfth century Umbria (in present-day Italy) the young Francis of Assisi had also stripped off his clothes in the most public of places—Assisi’s town square—before dressing in rags and leaving everything to live in poverty.

Modern-day interpretations of the strange behavior, and of the lights and pain and visions, reported by this group of men and women centuries ago, tend to center on the likely pathology of such physical and perceptual disturbances. “Migraine,” declare neurologists who have considered Hildegard’s symptoms. “Ergot poisoning,” proffer physicians who have studied Julian’s descriptions of her pain. “Post-partum depression,” psychiatrists say of Margery Kempe’s break with reality, while Saint Francis, Richard Rolle, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (referred to henceforth also as the *Cloud* author) are ripe for labeling with any number of neurotic or psychotic diagnoses. And the neurologists, physicians, and psychiatrists might well be correct, if these symptoms and signs were the end of the stories. However, these signs, in fact, were only the beginning, only the precipitators, of something that had very little to do with disease processes and everything to do with the elaboration of a richly detailed and complete world of visionary and mystical experiences that, once committed to writing by the men and women who received them, would survive to the present day and propel their recipients into the bright lights of twenty-first century recognition.

Saints Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen, along with Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, Margery Kempe, and the *Cloud* author, as well as many other men and women like them, are often categorized today under the collective label of “medieval mystics.” The term “medieval” is relatively

straightforward and refers to that long sweep of human history between the early fifth century AD (when the Western Roman Empire finally fell to the Visigoths) and the dawning of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century. However, in situating these mystics throughout that long-ago period, it is perhaps understandable that we might regard them as unusual individuals who have little or no relevance to our current lives and experiences. But it is only the term “medieval” that fixes them in time. The term, “mystics,” is more transferable in that it is not exclusive to the medieval period. Across the centuries, mystics have been, and are still today, a feature of the world’s major religions.

Broadly, a “mystic” is defined as one who experiences a personal and unmediated apprehension of the Divine. But what does this mean? The word “mysticism” comes from the Indo-European root *mu*, which is a transcription (and imitation) of the inarticulate sounds that are pre-language. We sometimes speak of babies “mewing” (and we say that cows “moo”). From that root word, too, we derive words like “mute” and “mystery,” and what we are really referring to is something that is beyond language, beyond ready explanation. Thus, “mysticism” means an experience, any experience, any “knowing” that is before, after, above, below, or beyond language; it is the experience of the “inexpressible,” but it is no less real and valid than the countless things to which language gives voice.

We have all had experiences that are difficult, even impossible, to put into words, occurrences that seem to come “out of the blue,” disrupting—or sometimes enhancing—our lives and making us question not only long-held beliefs but also the very nature of reality. For all of us, there are experiences that shake us, frighten us out of our customary patterns of

Introduction

thought and action. Such an experience may be the onset of a serious illness or the loss of a loved one. Sometimes it may be something much more subtle but unsettling, nevertheless. For example, have you ever looked at something very familiar but suddenly seen it in a new way? Or maybe you have caught a movement out of the corner of your eye that seems real but is so fleeting that you are not quite sure you have really seen anything. Perhaps you have had the coincidence of bumping into a friend you haven't seen for years but were just thinking about minutes before, or maybe you hear your long-departed mother's favorite song from decades ago playing on the radio when you start the car on the morning of her birthday. Some people speak of an uneasy feeling in the pit of their stomach a few hours before getting the news that a loved one has passed away, or a dream so vivid that they can't stop thinking about it the next day.

It is that intrusion of "otherness" into our ordinary everyday life that pulls us up, makes us stop in our tracks and wonder, even if only for a moment, before we resume the headlong rush toward the next thing we need to do. But for that moment, we are seeing things differently; in that moment we are experiencing the unexplainable, the inexpressible, and the mysterious. We are experiencing something mystical. In this sense, we are all mystics, but those who are specifically called "mystics" are those who, having had an experience where eternity seems to break through into the everyday, set about communicating—usually in writing—that experience for the benefit of others.

That benefit is almost as difficult to express as the description of the mystical experience itself, because mystics, in their divine apprehensions, experience nothing less than the essence of being, and that essence is God. Theirs are the vi-

Introduction

sions, auditions, and perceptions of the Divine reality. What they gain is the certainty that a bigger, more expansive life of the spirit exists beyond the boundaries of our five senses. It is the certainty of an immanent and transcendent God—always present in and to us. And with this comes the unerring conviction that such insights are not given for the individual mystic's benefit alone but for the benefit of all. Within each mystic's quiet, personal experience is the accompanying imperative to share it with others, with all who are open and willing to receive the insights.

The mystics' challenge, then, is finding the best way to effect that sharing, that communication, because, as we have discussed, what they have experienced is essentially beyond language, beyond accurate description. For all mystics, the attempt to describe what they have experienced is at best an approximation, a shadowy sketching of an ineffable reality. Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, the *Cloud* author, Margery Kempe, and Richard Rolle faced this dilemma in their own day; the passing of many centuries has only magnified the difficulty. Nevertheless, if an insight is divinely given, divinely true, then it is true not only in the time in which it is received but for all times. Truth is not defined by a particular decade, or century, nor confined to a particular place. It follows, then, that when the medieval mystics offer the "fruit" of their experience, it is "fruit freely given" as a gift for our modern sustenance, too. What they teach stretches across the centuries to be as relevant today as it was in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries.

However, for us today, engaging with something that was first experienced and shared hundreds of years ago comes with its own particular problems, one of the most fundamental being the strangeness of the medieval period itself to our

Introduction

contemporary understanding. Yes, it was a time of knights and ladies, castles, monks and monasteries—these are the popular (and appealing) images of the era. But the reality of life then was actually much harsher, with poor hygiene, crowded living conditions, a short life expectancy, a meager diet, diseases, pestilence, plagues, high mortality from illness in the general populace and from childbirth for women, illiteracy in all but the highest social and clerical classes, and the suppression of women in all sectors of society. And, of course, there were the extreme expressions of religious piety, which included the religious vocation of anchorites and anchoresses—those hundreds of men and women who willingly underwent a Mass for the Dead before being locked away for life in a tiny cell on the side of a church, or in openings in town walls, or in other cramped spaces; and also the hermits and hermitesses, who settled on a solitary life in caves or other isolated places. Then there were the heretics, who were brought under control by inquisitors and the application of bizarre tortures and state-administered death penalties; and adherence to beliefs and practices that included stringent mortification and penances, long and dangerous pilgrimages, adoration of relics, and more. We can only begin to imagine what medieval life was really like—the joys, sorrows, and hardships that accompanied people from cradle to grave.

Strange, too, to our modern sensibilities, and our strong (and appropriate) adherence to science and its methods and objectivity, is the notion of a mystical experience which, by definition, is personal, experiential, and subjective. We are rightly cautious about accepting claims of unusual occurrences that are not amenable to rational proof. At the same time, however, we acknowledge that there are other ways of “knowing,” “being,” and “experiencing” that are not

squarely based on reason. Our emotions, for example, often prompt us to act irrationally. We are moved to love, to hate, to fear, to dream, and while science might seek to give explanations of such things, the range and depth of human actions and reactions cannot be verified solely by recourse to empirical methods. The beauty of the natural world, the expanse of the cosmos, the vibrancy of human creativity also point to something that is far beyond the rational. Art, music, and poetry are among those things that speak to us in symbols that evoke our deepest emotions. We know these things are real—sometimes more real than the daily routine of eat-sleep-work that we move through almost mechanically—and it is nature, the arts, the emotions that can make us feel most alive, most in tune with ourselves and engaged with others. Again, such feeling and engagement is often not amenable to rational explanation nor to expression in straightforward language.

Similarly, the mystical experience takes the individual by surprise, snapping attachment to routine. It is not surprising, then, that mystics use symbolic language frequently in their texts to convey their ideas and insights. “Music of the spheres,” the “fire of love,” the “cloud of unknowing,” “*viriditas*,” “heavenly merriment,” “God, our mother,” “brother sun, sister moon” are a few of the many phrases that mystics have used to point to that which is beyond language, and to express the inexpressible.

In turn, something very interesting often happens when we hear, read, or pray with these and other symbolic phrases: our usual attachments to everyday language are disrupted and, not unlike the mystics themselves, we are drawn away from the material to the spiritual, from the literal to the metaphorical, from the ordinary to the extraordinary “otherness” of life. We start to see things differently, just as the mystics did.

Introduction

As it happens, this is a vital step in the mystics' communication of their received truth because, as we know, all communication is a two-way process. The dissemination of mystical insights is pointless, meaningless, unless those insights find an audience, stir a spark of interest or empathy in others. That is, for the communication of their experiences to be effective, the mystics require something from us. They need us to meet them halfway; to take the gift they offer and to unpack it with care. Their messages are not like slick advertisements that promise quick solutions. Really, they are threads of ideas, tails of dreams, wisps of truth caught in another dimension, packages of gossamer that the mystics have tried to transfer into a language that does not have words for the things they have seen and experienced. But, if we approach the mystics with an open heart and mind, with curiosity and respect, we might find that, like immersing ourselves in beautiful art or in music or in nature, we come to understand more deeply something of the human spirit—that part of us that is crafted in the divine image. We need to approach with humility, as we would when meeting someone for the first time, as we might chat to guests in our home, and with enough respect to put aside prejudice, especially around the limitations and restrictions that the medieval way of living and thinking imposed upon the people of that time.

And that's why I've invited the mystics to dinner. In our imaginations, at some stage, we have probably all answered—or at least thought about—the hypothetical question of which celebrities or historical persons we would like to have dinner with, without any limitations with regard to time or place. In this game of the imagination, royalty, inventors, actors, writers, artists, explorers are always popular dinner guest choices. I decided that sharing a meal with a group of mys-

Introduction

tics, without the constraints of the medieval times in which they first felt the divine call, would allow their personalities to shine beyond the flat pages of their texts, enable discussion around the essentials of their spirituality, and let us have a fireside seat as they share the relevance of their mystical insights with us, God's people of the twenty-first century. Of course, dinner guests can be unpredictable, and the mystics might choose to discuss something of the challenges of living in the Middle Ages but, for the most part, I am guessing that the focus of their sharing will be around the insights and lessons they received in their mystical experiences, and the ways in which those insights and lessons are transferable and relevant to living authentic, full lives, today. I'm presuming that the guests will not cover every aspect of their mystical and visionary lives because, after all, it's a dinner party conversation, not a lecture. I'm confident, though, that the extraordinary gift of their insights and lessons will be repackaged in modern wrapping so that while the gift—the truth of their experiences—is the same across time, the updated wrapping will make it easier to open and to appreciate that gift.

I'm certain, too, that they will be totally honest and that, in their open-hearted honesty, they will invite us to share in the human experience of mystery across the centuries and, hopefully, come to a clearer understanding of our own inner lives and to an awareness of the mystic within each of us.

THE DINNER GUESTS

I invited Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, *The Cloud of Unknowing* author, and Margery Kempe as my guests because, over many years,

Introduction

their writings have fascinated, challenged, comforted, and inspired me. I have been privileged to share their writings and spirituality with academic and general audiences, always to warm appreciation for the insights and blessings that these great medieval mystics bring. Over the years, too, I've come to know these three women and three men not only as extraordinary mystics but also as unique individuals, each with their own lifestyle, spiritual practice, and personality. These intriguing men and women will, no doubt, tell us more about their lives and vocations as the evening progresses but, as would be the case with any guest coming into our homes, we first like to know a little about them. Here, then, are a few general biographical details about our dinner companions.

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Francis was born in 1181 to Pietro di Bernadone and his wife, Pica, in Umbria (present-day Italy). Pietro, a cloth merchant, is said to have named his son "Francesco" (Francis) in honor of his business dealings in France. As a young man, Francis enjoyed the wild social life that his family's wealth allowed, but he also had an adventurous streak and, in 1201, went off to fight in a civil war. This proved a bad decision when Francis was captured by the enemy and imprisoned for a year, being released only when his wealthy father paid his ransom. Not deterred by the experience of captivity, Francis set off in 1204 to enlist for the Fourth Crusade. However, en route he experienced strange dreams and visions and, unable to continue with his journey, returned to Assisi to work in his father's cloth trade.

Francis could not settle in this work and began wandering alone in the hills above Assisi where, one day in 1205, he

found himself gazing at a crucifix in the old church of San Damiano. As he gazed, the figure of Christ spoke to him, instructing him to repair the church. Francis took the directive literally and set about repairing, stone by stone, the crumbling little church, paying for the repairs by selling his horse and some of his father's most expensive cloth. His father, angered by Francis's actions, took him before the town's council. In response to charges leveled against him, Francis stripped himself bare, giving back the clothes provided to him by his father, and declaring that henceforth his life would be dedicated to God. From then on, Francis dressed in rags and went about begging for his food, preaching poverty and the love of God.

Soon, others joined him. From late 1209 to early 1210, Francis and eleven brothers traveled to Rome to seek papal permission to establish a new religious order. At first, the pope refused, but then he had a dream in which he saw Francis propping up a crumbling church—and not just a single edifice, but the whole institution. So, in April 1210, Pope Innocent III gave verbal approval for the establishment of the Order of Friars Minor (later, the “Franciscans”). As more men joined Francis and the brothers, they set about preaching far and wide, even going into Egypt and the Holy Land in 1219. It is said that Francis preached to anyone and anything, including animals. When Francis's health and eyesight began to decline, he retreated from his extensive preaching, spending more time in solitary contemplation.

Francis died on Saturday, October 3, 1226, at age forty-five, and two years later, in 1228, he was canonized by Pope Gregory IX. In 1939, Francis was proclaimed a patron saint of Italy and, in 1980, he was declared the patron saint of ecology. He is also the patron saint of animals. His feast day

is October 4. In 2013, Jorge Bergoglio took the name “Francis” on his election to the papacy.

SAINT HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bermersheim, not far from modern-day Mainz, in the German Rhineland, and was one of several children of a noble, well-to-do family. According to one of her hagiographers, Godfrey of Disibodenberg, Hildegard displayed such remarkable holiness from a very young age that her parents dedicated her to a religious life when she was only seven years old. This dedication involved having Hildegard enclosed with the anchoress,¹ Jutta, in a cell attached to the local Benedictine monastery. From Jutta, Hildegard, in the company of other young girls also in Jutta’s care, received a basic education and instruction in the religious life. At some point, Jutta and her group moved from the anchorhold (a dwelling of an anchorite or anchoress) to a convent under the auspices of the local Benedictine monks in Disibodenberg. When she was about fifteen years old, Hildegard took the veil and became a Benedictine nun and, when Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard assumed leadership of the convent.

In 1141, visions that Hildegard had experienced for much of her life intensified and were brought to the attention of Pope Eugenius, who instructed that Hildegard should record the visions in detail. Thus began Hildegard’s lifelong writing career and the production of the wide range

1. A definition of “anchoress” (male equivalent “anchorite”) and a description of the anchoress’s lifestyle is given by the character, Julian, in the soup chapter.

Introduction

of amazing works, the most substantial being the *Scivias*, in which Hildegard describes a series of lucid visions with full theological explication. The following list of Hildegard's known works attests to the range of her knowledge, skill, and creativity:

The Visionary Trilogy

Liber scivias domini (*Know the Ways of the Lord*)

Liber vitae meritorum (*Book of Life's Merits*)

Liber divinorum operum (*Book of the Divine Works*)

Natural Science

*Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturum
creaturam* (*Book on the Subtleties of Many
Kinds of Creatures*)

Physica or *Liber simplices medicinae* (*Book of
Simple Medicine*)

Causae et curae or *Liber compositae medicinae*
(*Book of Compound Medicine*)

Miscellaneous Works

Expositiones evangeliorum (*Discourses on the
Gospels*)

Litterae ignotae (*Cryptic Writings*)

Lingua ignota (*Cryptic Language*)

Explanatio regulae Sancti Benedictini
(*Explanation of the Rule of St. Benedict*)

Explanatio symboli Sancti Athanasii
(*Explanation of the Symbols of St. Athanasius*)

Vita Sancti Ruperti (*Life of St. Rupert*)

Vita Sancti Disibodi (*Life of St. Disibod*)

Introduction

*Solutiones triginta octo questionum (Solutions to
Thirty-Eight Questions)
Epistolae (Letters)*

Play

Ordo Virtutum (Play of the Virtues)

Musical Works

*Compositions, collectively called Symphonia ar-
monie celestium revelationum (Symphony of
the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)*

Hildegard died in 1179. Her heart and tongue are pre-
served in a golden reliquary in the Rüdesheim parish church.
Although she has been recognized locally as a saint since the
twelfth century, she was officially canonized on May 10,
2012, and on October 7, later that same year, Pope Benedict
XVI named Hildegard a Doctor of the Church (one of only
four women Doctors of the Church, among thirty-five male
Doctors). Her feast day is September 17.

RICHARD ROLLE, HERMIT OF HAMPOLE

Richard Rolle, mystic and prolific writer, was born ca.1300 in
Thornton-le-dale in Yorkshire, England. As a young man he
studied at the University of Oxford but, before achieving his
master's degree, he abandoned his studies and returned to
Yorkshire to take up the life of a hermit.

Many of the details of Richard's life are recorded by
Richard himself in his semi-autobiographical work *Incendium
Amoris*. Originally written in Latin, it was translated after his

death and circulated in English as *The Fire of Love*. Although this work is often considered to be lacking in organization and cohesion by modern readers, there is no question that Richard describes his mystical experiences, particularly his apprehensions of *calor*, *canor*, and *dulcor* (warmth, song/melody, and sweetness), with great clarity and enthusiasm. In addition, his dedication to the prayerful and largely solitary life of a hermit is believed to have inspired him to write texts of guidance for women living as nuns or those who were entering into the solitary life of an anchoress. These works were all written in English and include *Ego Dormio*, *The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living*. His other works include extensive commentaries and treatises. Overall, Richard Rolle's influence and popularity as a spiritual writer, not only during the latter part of his own lifetime but also for more than a century following his death, are evidenced by the survival to the present day of over four hundred copies of his works produced throughout England between 1390 and about 1500.

He died in 1349, possibly as a result of the bubonic plague (the "Black Death"), which was raging in England at the time. He was buried at Hampole and a shrine was dedicated to him there. The nuns of Hampole composed a *legenda* in the expectation of his canonization.² Reported miracles at his tomb strengthened this expectation, but it was never realized.

2. A *legenda* is a book of lessons prepared after a holy person's death in the expectation that this person's holiness in life will be recognized and that canonization will follow. The *legenda* will often form part of the daily prayers of those petitioning for the canonization.

Introduction

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING *AUTHOR*

The anonymous author of the influential work on contemplation *The Cloud of Unknowing* is also the author of several other works on mystical theology, including *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*, *Dionysius's Mystical Teaching*, *The Epistle of Discretion in the Stirrings of the Soul*, and *The Treatise of the Discerning of Spirits*. In his writings, the author gives little clue as to his identity beyond indicating that the guidance he offers in *The Cloud of Unknowing* is based on his own experience of the contemplative life. It has been variously speculated, and argued, that the author was a secular priest, a monk, a Carthusian, a hermit, a recluse, a country parson, but none of these can be proven. The only facts about this author are to be adduced from his texts, which he wrote in a particular (English) dialect, suggesting that he was of an East Midlands (England) background. Furthermore, reference in his works to other (known) authors of the time and, in turn, references to *The Cloud of Unknowing* author's texts by later medieval spiritual writers such as Walter Hilton, put the time of composition of his works between 1349 and 1395.

JULIAN OF NORWICH

Biographical details about Julian of Norwich are limited and come mainly from her own writings. An exact birthdate is not known, but in the account of her mystical experiences Julian records that her *Showings* (also known as *Revelations of Divine Love*) began on May 8, 1373, and that, at the time, she was thirty and a half years of age.³ This gives a birth year of

3. Some scholars regard May 13 and not May 8 as the date of the beginning of Julian's revelations. This discrepancy of opinion arises from

Introduction

late 1342 or early 1343. At some stage of her life, most probably after receiving the revelations, Julian became an anchoress, enclosed in the Church of St. Julian in Carrow, Norwich, in England. It seems likely that Julian took her name from this church (as was common practice among anchoresses of the fourteenth century), which means that we do not even know her real (birth) name. Similarly, her date of death is unknown, but parish records of the time show that she was still alive in 1416 because, in that year, small bequests were made to her in two local wills, with the money going toward her upkeep as the church's anchoress. Julian wrote about the manner of reception and the details of her revelations in two forms: what we now call the *Short Text*, which was written very soon after the receipt of the revelations, and the *Long Text* which, with its expanded details of the original showings and considerable theological reflection on the initial content of the showings, was written up to twenty years after the short version. Julian wrote in Middle English and is credited as being the first (known) female author in English.

MARGERY KEMPE

It is a matter of historical record that Margery was born in 1373 in the Norfolk market town of Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn) where her father, John Brunham, was mayor for five separate terms, and that, at the age of twenty,

different readings of the date on certain manuscripts due to lack of clarity of the Roman numerals used. Some scholars consider that what looks like an '8' (VIII) could actually be '13' (XIII) with the lower half of the X having been erased or worn away over time. I consider May 8 to be the more likely date.

Introduction

Margery married John Kempe and, within a year of the marriage, had given birth to their first child. Details after that come from Margery's own account of her life in what is called *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Here she explains that although she and her husband went on to have a further thirteen children, it was the first birth that was especially decisive as, immediately following it, Margery experienced terrifying visions and fiendish torments of such severity that she was unable to look after herself, her child, or her household. Relief from the torment came in the form of a personal visit from Jesus. Extraordinary as this visit seemed to the young Margery, she was an entrepreneurial woman by nature and saw her return to health as a sign that she should turn her hand to commercial ventures such as brewing and milling.

The complete failure of these ventures, coupled with a further spiritual experience in the form of an auditory preview of the bliss of heaven, pushed Margery to dedicate her life to God. Her commitment took an extreme form with incessant praying, daily confession, the wearing of a hair shirt, and rigorous fasting, among other practices. Much of her subsequent life was spent attempting to gain validation of her experiences and official sanction for her adopted lifestyle. One of those from whom she sought validation was Julian of Norwich, and Margery's account of their meeting (c. 1413) provides the only contemporary eyewitness account of Julian giving direct advice to visitors at her anchorhold window.

Margery's travels took her much farther than Norwich, however, and her descriptions of the journeys and pilgrimages all over England, and as far afield as Rome and Jerusalem, mark her as an intrepid woman as well as the author of the first autobiography in English. The date of her death is not known, but Margery was still alive in 1438 when

Introduction

she is recorded as having been admitted to the Guild of the Trinity in Lynn. One further, and final, mention of her—again in relation to the Guild—is made on May 22, 1439.

FACT AND FICTION

The idea of six medieval mystics attending a present-day dinner party is obviously the creation of the author, but it is based firmly on the lives and writings of the six mystics who are the “guests.” That is, all the events and conversations during the dinner party are, of course, inventions but, as far as the author’s knowledge and skill allows, they are, in general content, authentic representations of many of the recorded events of the guests’ lives and of the essential topics at the core of their writings and spiritual experiences, albeit updated, synthesized, and elaborated by the author for the purpose of enhancing engagement with those essential topics in line with twenty-first century experiences and concerns, and in the spirit of a creative work. Broader discussion topics derived from the mystics’ central ideas are inventions of the author, and general information and discussion about aspects of medieval life are drawn from the author’s knowledge of the period.

While it is a matter of historical record that Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe met around 1413 when Margery went to Julian’s anchorhold to discuss spiritual matters, and while Margery records some details of this meeting in her autobiography,⁴ the two women were not known to each other

4. Margery records the visit to, and conversation with, Julian in her autobiography. See Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed.

Introduction

outside this one formal consultation. Nor were any of the other mystics known to each other, though it is possible that Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, and the *Cloud* author were familiar with the historical details of Saint Francis of Assisi, who had been canonized in 1228. Furthermore, the Franciscan order was well established in England as well as on the Continent by the fourteenth century. Margery Kempe even lists Assisi as a destination on one of her many pilgrimages. It is possible, too, that the writings of the earlier mystics may have been known to some of the later mystics but nowhere in the mystics' works is this reliably attested. Other than those connections, the guests and the host get to know each other through the course of the evening.

Footnotes have been kept to a minimum to provide, as far as possible, a seamless account of an enjoyable dinner party for readers. However, the direct quotes used in the story are duly acknowledged in footnotes. Also included in footnotes and the Glossary are explanatory comments on unusual or particular aspects of life in the Middle Ages.

Sanford Brown Meech, EETS OS 293 (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42.