Sara S. Poor and Nigel Smith, eds.

Mysticism and Reform, 1400–1750. ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern Series. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 408. Pb, \$45.

This collection takes up the challenge issued by noted historian Brad Gregory when he threw down the gauntlet in his magnum opus *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). In this book, he advocates “a genealogical approach [which] can illuminate aspects of the Reformation that continue to influence the present but have remained largely unrecognized,” at the same time warning potential practitioners of his methodology that “[a] genealogical approach that emphasizes the continuing influence of the distant past in the present runs counter to the recent tendency among many historians toward ‘the flattening of history or the telescoping of historical time’” (*Unintended Reformation*, 6). This regards method. On the content level, he chronicles the many failures of the Reformation to accomplish its aims (but also shows the “unintended” consequences it nevertheless spawned) in arenas so widely varied as science, metaphysics, capitalism, university education, and politics. However, on the topic of mysticism Professor Gregory remains curiously silent; indeed, there is not even an index entry for this word in his nearly six-hundred-page volume.

That, I would argue, is where Sara Poor’s and Nigel Smith’s book comes in. For another colossal failure of the Reformation was in the area of mysticism: both a failure to squelch its practice and obliterate or neutralize its erstwhile devotees, and a failure to offer any suitable alternative to fill the void left by its “absence.” I have traced a similar void in the area of religious institutional responses to demonic possession where the Reformation left no suitable alternative besides witch-burning to the officially-sanctioned exorcisms which, after the split, were now suddenly outlawed. Given the lack of any other efficacious remedy, the only apparent solution to the “Problem of Evil” was to find a scapegoat and then burn the witch. But unauthorized exorcisms persisted in post-Reformation England; for example, both surreptitious Catholic ones performed by a Jesuit priest, William Weston, at Denham (1584–86) and Puritan ones performed by the likes of the minister John Darrell (1590s). In the same way that exorcisms were officially eradicated by the Reformation, but persisted anyway, so too did lingering vestiges of mysticism prove impossible to root out. This volume tells that hidden story.

The essays collected here together, which originated with a conference on “Mysticism, Reform and the Formation of Modernity” at Princeton University in 2008, represent extraordinary breadth within a trans-Atlantic scope. Both

Catholic and Protestant post-Reformation mystical traditions are thus (re) covered. The book would have benefitted from a composite bibliography, and the chapter titles regrettably often leave the reader guessing as to their geographical or temporal parameters. The main focus of most contributions is on northern and central Europe, although an eighteenth-century community in Pennsylvania is also incorporated. Specific mystical figures treated include Gertrude More, Jane Lead, Elizabeth Hooten, and John Austin for England; and Martin Luther, Valentin Weigel, Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, and Marie Christine Sauer for Germany and German America. The Low Countries are represented through mystical sermons written by religious women there. Visual culture is encompassed too through discussions of mystical experience portrayed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art. Psychoanalytical approaches, never far from postmodern approximations to this subject matter, are employed by several of these scholars, most notably Genelle C. Gertz in "Quaker Mysticism and the Return of the Medieval Repressed." The crowning jewel of the volume, in my opinion, and the essay destined to make the greatest impact is the last one, Niklaus Largier's "The Rhetoric of Mysticism: From Contemplative Practice to Aesthetic Experiment," in some ways equivalent to my own "The Rhetoric of Exorcism" (*Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 23, no. 3 [2005]: 209–37, doi: 10.1525/rh.2005.23.3.209) Hopefully by now we are past the point where a healthy respect for religious traditions prevents us from applying to their analysis every tool in our scholarly arsenal, including rhetoric, histories of emotion, and discourse studies. The canon of mysticism is expanding, as I signalled in *A New Companion to Hispanic Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), and with it so too should our methodologies.

The overwhelming impression created by all the bizarre, eccentric, tragic, and sometimes funny stories we find here of individual seekers and the often cult-like communities they built to live together is one of a Pandora's box which the Reformation tried furiously to keep locked. Instead, it flew open and pandemonium broke out. From "Bible Brabblers" to "Saintly Ideots," "Solitaries" to "Householders," mystical sects proliferated in the wake of the Catholic Church's demise as the sole centralized authority within Western Christendom. Paradoxically, many Reformers objected to specific forms of prayer or worship—notable here is Gertrude More's objection to Jesuit-style meditation after the model of Saint Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*—and attempted to implement tight controls over individual experience. But since the Reformation failed in the sense of establishing an alternative monolithic authority which could have rivalled the Catholic Church in prestige, wealth, and power, the result instead was a splintering into innumerable warring

factions. For mystical practice specifically, this made it confusing to ascertain the validity of ecstasy, prophecy, and other forms of private devotional practice. There was no universally-accepted arbiter any more. The referee walked off the soccer field. This means that the documents we have available to study these offshoot communities are often distorted by purposeful suppressions—most tellingly in the case of Marie Christine Sauer, any mention of whom was deliberately excised from the chronicle of her monastic community, and whose roguish life is painstakingly pieced back together by Bethany Wiggin in a fascinating essay that reads more like a detective story. Under the old Catholic system, an inquisitor would have been sent to investigate the alleged irregularities of this disturbed woman's behavior, with the consequence that we would now have a treasure trove of documents produced from different perspectives (perhaps none of them reliable, but at least there would be more to work with than the anamorphic picture we get from the carefully-constructed public image presented in her companions' "sisterbook"). After the Reformation, local authorities tended to prevail, and individual practitioners were left without a stable hierarchy or established bureaucracy through which to lodge an appeal.

The Reformation failed, all right, according to its own stated aims and objectives. But happily for anthropologists of religion, it opened a Pandora's box on a wealth of peculiar mystically-derived devotional practices, each one more curious than the last. The ensuing scene looks like what the children do to the house, egged on by the Cat in the Hat, when the parents leave home. This refreshing assortment of revisionist microhistories together demonstrate that mysticism did not die with the Reformation after all. It stayed alive and kicking.

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