

BOOK REVIEWS

## Andrew Prevot, *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life: Theology, Philosophy, and Feminism*

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In *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life*, Andrew Prevot creates an important dialogue between traditional theological approaches to mysticism and voices marginalised due to race, gender and economics. His goal is to expand the traditional Catholic category of mystical theology, using ‘a more viable Christian and feminist approach’ (p. 66) that engages experiences of marginalised persons, especially women of colour. Prevot brings a critical and interdisciplinary lens to his systematic theology, drawing on postmodern philosophy and political/liberation theologies. This approach, he emphasises, is a truly Catholic model of relating theology and philosophy which enables theology to learn from philosophy while maintaining its distinctiveness and priority.

While drawing upon a wide range of resources, this work is written for the mainstream of Catholic academic theology, particularly those scholar-theologians working with mystical theology. Prevot recognises that his work is analytic not experiential, but says it is rooted in his own Hispanic Catholic confessional experiences. Indeed, his definition of mysticism steps away from the analytic frame of mystical studies to claim theologically that mysticism is the ‘revelation of uncreated grace’ (p. 269) through experience of divine union with God. His definition of ordinary also bridges theological and critical approaches since he recognises the ‘connotative range of ordinariness: the normative and the quotidian’ (p. 11).

This is apologetic, bridging work, working with both mainstream Catholic theology and liberation-oriented theologies in dialogue with postmodern philosophies. Indeed, bridges and connections form the structure of the entire work. First, bridges are built among three sections: Part I on twentieth-century Catholic mystical theology; Part II on postmodern philosophy, Part III on ‘intersectional’ mestizo/a, womanist and Black liberatory theologies. Then, further bridging occurs within each section with chapters that highlight two contrasting figures, while drawing on other surrounding voices.

In his discussions of each figure, Prevot reads with a ‘spirit of generosity and a desire for mutual understanding’ (p. 269), seeking ‘to receive what is best about each of [the authors’] efforts, while clarifying their shared and respective limitations’ (p. 31). In Part I, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar are treated not as opposed alternatives but as sharing insights on Catholic mystical theology. Rahner’s work demonstrates how mysticism as experience of universal grace is at the core of Christian theology. Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, seen, perhaps provocatively, as a dialogical whole, demonstrate the centrality of obedience and suffering to mystical frames. In Part II,

a chapter comparing Michel Henri and Michel de Certeau begins a conversation on mysticism as immanence or alterity. In the following chapter the contrasting feminist voices of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva offers critical perspectives on embodiment and language not found in the Catholic theological and philosophical materials. And in Part III, the *mestizaje* insights of Ada-Maria Isasi-Diaz and Gloria Anzaldua about *la lucha, lo cotidiano*, the Virgin Mary and Christ in one chapter are put into conversation with reflections on blackness, with an emphasis on the writings of Alice Walker and M. Shawn Copeland in a second chapter.

Prevot's readings of each figure are multifaceted, searching out threads and tensions in ways that enable readings that are against the grain. Throughout he critiques limiting forms of essentialism, Eurocentrism and phallogentrism. Working with French feminist, and, in particular, *mestizaje* and Black women's works brings new awareness of embodiment, action/praxis, resistance and joy, as part of an incarnational mystical experience. The dialogue with women of colour allows more materialist understandings of the 'ordinary'/quotidian in Catholic thinking.

Especially important is Prevot's critical engagement with ways mystical theologies have 'divinised' subordination and suffering. He seeks both to condemn any valorisation of obedient suffering while recognising the deep meaningfulness to so many women of colour of the crucified Christ and, for Catholic women, the Virgin Mary. He suggests that even though church structures may have interpreted these figures to sanction subjection and obedient acceptance of suffering, Latinx and Black women have understood these figures as affirming their own worth and dignity, offering support/solidarity, hope and resistance. Prevot brings further complexity to considerations of suffering through emphasising the ways apophatic approaches to divine as mystical 'no-thing' (p. 225) can reinscribe domination. He emphasises *mujerista* and womanist insistence of the power of joy that can shape resistance and claims of freedom.

Prevot's deeply nuanced and complex work does indeed, as he hopes, expand the scope of the *sensus fidelium*. He is conservative, insisting upon the validity of tradition and refusing reductionist interpretations of mystical experience. But he is also bold, engaging theologically not only with mystical texts by medieval and early modern European women, but with non-European voices, both scholarly and popular. For him dialogue among these voices can expand, for example, Speyr's and Balthasar's description of the love enacted in the interior relations of the Trinity to include erotic, joyous bodies. On occasion, one can wish for even more boldness and less multiplicity, but this is inevitable when writing on lived experiences in an academic theological voice. Prevot's work is not only of value to Catholic theology, but also to others, like this Protestant reviewer, engaging the theological value of ordinary lives.

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