

The Actively Abjected: A Hermeneutics of Empowerment in Christian Mysticism



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The mantra related to this document has been the same for the last six months: after the viva. After the viva. It is safe to say that most of what I have wished to write here over the last four years has changed from gushing proclamations of love and devotion through to more formalised expressions of respect and thanks, to bitter, fury-driven frenzies of outrage and incredulity of cruelty and injustice. As it stands now, I wish only to mention the people who have made positive impact on my writing, on my life and on my work as you find it here.

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned broadly with purported mystics and how the Roman Catholic Church conceives of them theologically, and treats them in practicality. In exploring the dynamics of power at work when an individual claims to have dialogue with God, I identify a very particular process that occurs, namely active abjection, and illustrate this using examples taken from the writings of various purported mystics. I argue that there is a collection of people—the actively abjected—who occupy a very specific role within the Roman Catholic Church, and that this role has not been recognized. I go on to suggest a way in which they can be understood and respected for the role they play. To do this, I draw upon particular philosophical models of understanding from Hannah Arendt and Julia Kristeva.

I aspire to encourage a deeper and more complicated understanding of the nature of institutionalized oppression, and to offer a reconstructive model for how those who encounter potentially problematic individuals within communities might work and interact with them in a non-oppressive manner. This thesis is a work of Catholic theology in that it offers a theological and philosophical argument for the recognition of a particular role certain individuals play in maintaining the structure and definition of the Catholic Church. But it is also intended as a work of political philosophy. Both Arendt and Kristeva, whose writing I use as a lens to examine a particular phenomenon found in religious communities are theorists in the tradition of political philosophy and my intention is to expand the application of their models.

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Introduction: The Actively Abjected

This thesis began as a study of the concept of 'gift' in relation to mystical experience. I wanted to know why, within Catholic theology, particular experiences or events that seemed far from pleasurable or beneficial to the people experiencing them were conceived of as gifts. Moreover, what were the theological implications for understanding mystical experiences as gifts? Can we meaningfully talk about gifts from God, if we accept this Maussian understanding of gift exchange, when God is omnipotent? How does a Maussian understanding of gift economy apply to a dynamic in which one party is God? Can we ever truly give God anything?

All of these questions remain. After four years of doctoral work I have not got answers to any of them—but I have a deeper understanding of the complexities of the questions, and of course, a collection of new questions. My exploration of the literature surrounding mystical experiences led me to more important theological questions concerning the structures of power and the way those structures interact with individuals who claim special experiences. The question I started to explore four years ago relates but only slightly, to the question I ended up exploring and the answers I am proposing in this completed thesis.

Like my initial interest, my present contribution to the discussion of what is broadly termed 'mysticism' within Catholic theology is concerned with the ways in which individuals are treated by the Holy See as an institution. I seek to understand the

way in which these individuals fit into wider Roman Catholic theology and help to define what it is to be a Roman Catholic. I discovered that there is a collection of individuals who do not seem to have been adequately described by mystical scholarship or by the scholarship on the way in which the Holy See, as an administrative structure, engages with mystics.

I argue that there is a collection of people—the actively abjected—who occupy a very specific role within the Roman Catholic Church, and that this role has not been recognized. I go on to suggest a way in which they can be understood and respected for the role they play. To do this, I draw upon particular philosophical models of understanding from Hannah Arendt and Julia Kristeva.

I aspire to encourage a deeper and more complicated understanding of the nature of institutionalized oppression, and to offer a reconstructive model for how those who encounter potentially problematic individuals within communities might work and interact with them in a non-oppressive manner. This thesis is a work of Catholic theology in that it offers a theological and philosophical argument for the recognition of a particular role certain individuals play in maintaining the structure and definition of the Catholic Church. But it is also intended as a work of political philosophy.¹ Both Arendt and Kristeva, whose writing I use as a lens to examine a

¹ It is important to note that I do not see this project as a form of political theology as understood by Johannes Metz. Although I share Metz's concern that the Church's post-Enlightenment theology has tended to focus on the individual rather than the social or communal Johannes Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), I have no interest in using scripture to fix this problem. Although this thesis advances a

particular phenomenon found in religious communities are theorists in the tradition of political philosophy and my intention is to expand the application of their models.

Methodology and Structure

I encountered a collection of commonalities when studying the texts of mystics.² In studying various texts from a wide variety of sources, separated by centuries and sometimes thousands of miles, I noticed that the texts of purported mystics with political and social impact, shared three characteristics. These three characteristics form the basis of my model of the *actively abjected*. In Chapter One, I position my model within the literature on mysticism and offer a broad overview of the three characteristics possessed by the actively abjected, before exploring these characteristics in depth in Chapters Two, Three, and Four.

I have studied the writings of various people who claim to have had some form of experience of unity, in the broadest sense, with the divine. Because I was interested in the way in which these people were dealt with by the Roman Curia, I focused on

theology of liberation, because it addresses problems of power and authority within the Catholic Church, with the intention of reducing oppression, it is more political philosophy than political theology. That the resources used here, the testimony of mystics, happen to be of a specifically Catholic religious nature is of secondary importance to the philosophical and political questions they raise as contested epistemic resources.

² The definition of ‘mystic’ is something that I explore in depth further ahead, but in the context of this brief overview and introduction to my thesis, I am happy for the term to denote those people who claim an experience or experiences of unity with the divine.

texts written by people who claimed to be Catholic, or, in the case of Vassula Ryden, who actively dialogued with the Roman Curia of the Holy See. These texts were written by men and women, although I focused particularly on those written by women.³ As I was interested in identifying individuals who were most effective in bringing about political change whilst they themselves were subject to cultural, social, economic, and racial and/or gender oppression, I was drawn to women who are universally oppressed under patriarchy.

Under white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy, women of colour are specifically oppressed.⁴ If there were writings by women of colour on mysticism that had been engaged with by the Roman Curia, my study would focus on them. As it is, one of the manifestations of white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy is that women of colour were historically, as they are today, denied access to the combination of various privileges that allowed a consistent writing practice to emerge. Moreover,

³ Throughout the thesis I chose to use the term 'woman mystic' and not 'female mystic', for three reasons. The distinction between woman and female is a distinction between gender and biology but it is also between subject and object. I am interested in the lived experiences of women, not 'female people' - I understand these to be different. Secondly, the use of the term 'female' reduces women down to their reproductive abilities (or lack thereof) and as such is dehumanising. Finally, within the scholarship on mysticism, the term 'female mystic' is only ever used to identify an individual mystic as not a man. We do not use the term 'male mystic' because the term 'female mystic' is understood as the qualification; the male is universal. Moreover, the term female is most often used to imply inferiority. For all of these reasons, I prefer the terms woman mystic and women mystics.

⁴ The term 'White-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy' was coined by bell hooks in her, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1981). She says; 'I began to use the phrase in my work "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality.'

as Joy Bostic writes, ‘Historically the dominant strands of Western Christianity have espoused a worldview in which the embodied knowledges of others (namely, female, darker skinned, and nonheterosexual) are viewed as suspect’ (Bostic 2013).

Those of us attempting to address how the Roman Curia enters into discussion (or not) with problematic members of the Roman Catholic Church, have to acknowledge that very often women of colour were not considered agents worthy of engagement. While there are texts by mystic women of colour, they are rare. Those that do exist have largely not been used by the Roman Catholic Church to support dogma or doctrine or even to define itself against.⁵ Accordingly, the texts I have used to illustrate the phenomenon of the actively abjected are written by women who were broadly white, generally privileged, and who had the privilege to be able to write about their experiences at length. Without doubt these women were more oppressed than their male mystic counterparts, but they do not represent the most marginalized of their society, culture or time.

The majority of the world's population are not represented in this thesis – more significantly, the majority of the population of the Roman Catholic Church are not represented in this thesis. Women of colour make up the large majority of the Catholic population.⁶ The global Catholic population is also one of the most

⁵ For an excellent discussion of Black women's mysticism see Joy Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶ The most recent research shows that 67% of the Catholic population are drawn from countries outside of Europe and North America. Different research claims that roughly 55%

economically disadvantaged, and intersects with many other forms of oppression. In this thesis, I attempt to use my relative privilege to describe a phenomenon and to offer a model for addressing it that can be used to address other forms of oppression beyond the examples I consider. Although poor Catholic women of colour are not seen in this study, it is hoped that this thesis can contribute to their emancipation.

Although the texts I use here are written by white women with a degree of privilege, this is where their commonality ends. The texts are from markedly different times, and written by dissimilar people. Although this thesis is not explicitly a form of hermeneutical phenomenology, my methodology takes much inspiration from this field and from the work of Paul Ricoeur. I make an important distinction between dialogue and communication, arguing that what is broadly termed ‘mystical experience’ is in fact dialogue and not simply communication with the divine. This distinction between dialogue and other forms of communication is also important to Ricoeur, who, in an attempt to define ‘text’, argues that ‘the text is a discourse fixed by writing’ (Ricoeur 1991). In other words, text is distinct from spoken communication in that it is concretized in such a way as to prevent dialogue or discourse. Discourse is fixed by the act of writing: preventing, or at least limiting, a certain interpretation of meaning:

of practicing Catholics are female. See Mark Gret, Mary Gaultier, and Thomas Gaunt, 'Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church', accessed 03/03/15 2015.

What is fixed by writing is thus a discourse that could be said, of course, but that is written precisely because it is not said. Fixation by writing takes the very place of speech, occurring at the site where speech could have emerged. This suggests that a text is really a text only when it is not restricted to transcribing an anterior speech, when instead it inscribes directly in written letters what the discourse means (Ricoeur 1991).

There is no dialogue with the written word in the way there is dialogue with speech. Through the act of writing, the writing of the text and the reading of the text are distinctly separated into two different acts. We cannot engage with a text in the way we would engage with a conversation partner, and yet we still feel that we engage:

...the substitution of reading for a dialogue that has not occurred is so manifest [...] when we happen to encounter an author and speak to him (about his book, for example), we experience a profound disruption of the peculiar relation that we have with the author in and through his work' (Ricoeur 1991).

Reading and dialogue may share some phenomenological similarities, but they are distinct in their differences. Writing, according to Ricoeur, is 'a realization comparable and parallel to speech'. It is a (temporary?) concretization of the author's intention: 'Hence we could say that what comes to writing is discourse as intention-to-say and that writing is a direct inscription of this intention' (Ricoeur 1991).

Thus what we have in the texts of those individuals who claim to have dialogued with the divine, is a realization of the intention-to-say, but it is not a simple case of these authors intending-to-say their own thoughts, stories, or

beliefs. Because they are realizing the intention-to-say of God, which was expressed to them in a dialogue - something distinctly *not* realized (or concretized) - it is of a unique order. The distinct quality of these particular texts pulls them into relief and marks them as of a particular type, unites them as of a certain value. Therefore, what they share in this quality and type, is more important than what they do not share in terms of historical locatedness.

It is also problematic to conceive of 'historical texts' as artefacts of evidence that can only be understood 'properly' when read within the context of their culture. This thesis is not an historical study. I do not claim to be an historian of mystics or their writing. Evidently there is value in the historical study of Teresa of Avila, for example, or of Hidegaard of Bingen's community, but one cannot gain a form of 'pure' understanding of a text, or even a more pure understanding of the intention of the author, by locating it in a nexus of knowledge gleaned from other texts. 'Thus we speak of the Greek world or the Byzantine world. This world can be called "imaginary" in the sense that it is *represented* by writing in lieu of the world *presented* by speech; but this imaginary world is itself a creation of literature' (Ricoeur 1991). 'Writing preserves discourse and makes it an archive available for individual and collective memory' (Ricoeur 1991), but it is important how we use this archive. I am not concerned with the quest for *understanding* in this thesis as much as I am with *interpreting*. Ricoeur argues that one can only achieve

understanding through interpretation, and as such, I use texts drawn from a variety of historical contexts toward this effort.

Kristeva herself, along with Derrida and other structuralists and critics of structuralism, made similar points before Ricoeur:

Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of 'the literary word' as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than as a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. (Kristeva and Roudiez 1980).

As Katherine Goodnow writes, 'History and society [...] become a mosaic of texts drawn upon by the writer or the reader to produce or interpret any particular word, sentence, or story' (Goodnow 2010). In this way all texts are intertextual; all are formed within and draw upon a 'mosaic' of influence:

In the broadest sense, intertextual dialogism refers to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, and which reach the text not only through recognizable influences but also through a subtle process of dissemination (Stam 1992).

In this way:

...the intertext of a film such as Kubrick's *The Shining* could be said to consist of all the genres to which the film refers, for example the horror film and the melodrama, but also to that class of films called literary adaptations with the

attendant literary affiliates such as the Gothic novel, and extending to the entire canon of Kubrick films, Jack Nicholson films, and so forth. The intertext of a work of art, then, may be taken to include not just other artworks in the same or comparable form, but also all the 'series' within which the singular text is situated (Stam 1992).

I understand each of the narratives of mystical testimony used in this thesis as members of a series within which each singular text is situated.

Catholicism

This thesis focuses on individuals who actively work with Roman Catholic theology and the Roman Curia, the administrative apparatus of the Holy See. The Holy See is the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church. I chose these individuals because they were endorsed as mystics by the Roman Curia, or because they attempted to be so endorsed. In part, this thesis focuses on Roman Catholic theology and Roman Catholic mystics for practical reasons: it is important to have a tight area of focus specifically related to the argument being made in order to demonstrate my model. Moreover, the Roman Curia is the institution (or part of the institution) most responsible to date for labelling individuals who claim communication with the divine as Christian saints or heretics.

Although I focus on Catholicism, it is my intention that this new model of understanding how religious authorities engage with those who claim dialogue with the divine is able to be applied to all religious and spiritual traditions. That the

examples used here are all drawn from the Catholic tradition does not imply that the subject of active abjection cannot be studied elsewhere. I hope that it is applicable to other institutional forms of oppression.⁷ However, it must be noted that the Roman Catholic Church is a particularly apt subject for this initial study because the ecclesiastical structures of the Roman Curia seem to demand that the Church react to those who claim communication with the divine.

It may seem surprising that in this thesis I take seriously judgements passed by the Roman Curia. It may be tempting to dismiss the judgements of bodies such as the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (which I discuss below) as the pronouncements of a misogynistic and archaic institution whose *raison d'être* is to maintain power and protect the most powerful members of the institution. But to do so would be to underestimate the impact these judgments have on the lives of the actively abjected themselves, as well as on the lives of women who might look to the texts of the actively abjected for guidance in their own lives. It would also be to miss an opportunity to criticize and unpick the often problematic theological, moral, and ideological foundations underpinning such judgements in a manner which may have impact.

This is important because the Roman Curia is unlike any other organization in its institutional set up. From one perspective, the Roman Catholic Church incorporates more diverse traditions, cultures, and people than any other organization or

⁷ By this I do not mean that all religions might be institutional forms of oppression.

institution (Gret et al. 2013a). From another perspective, it is a dogmatic, hierarchical and controlling force in the lives of billions of people. Both of these perspectives are true. Unlike the Protestant Church, or, more accurately, Protestant Churches, the Roman Catholic Church maintains coherence, obedience, and control over billions of adherents through its centralized administration. This plurality of traditions is held together by a quasi-legal structure. Each individual parish priest has to answer to and obey their diocesan bishop, all of whom are obedient to the Bishop of Rome; the Pope. It is this quasi-legal structure, based upon theological foundations, which makes engagement with the judgements of the Roman Curia worthwhile and possible.

As well as priests and bishops, the structure of the Roman Catholic Church is such that some bishops are chosen by the Pope to be cardinals. The cardinals are considered ‘princes’ of the Church, and the Congregation of Cardinals are responsible for electing a new Pope when one dies (or more unusually, retires). Cardinals play a particularly important role in the discipline and management of the Roman Catholic Church, as they head up various departments of the Roman Curia. If we understand the Roman Curia as the administrative mechanism of the Church it is fair to understand the cardinals as managers of each separate administrative section.

Cardinal Ratzinger, whose letters I examine later in this thesis, was, before his appointment as Pope Benedict XVI, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of

the Faith (CDF). This is the department within the Roman Curia responsible for managing claims of miracles and extraordinary communications with God. It can be argued that the CDF is one of the most important of the various departments of the Curia, as it is the role of the CDF to ‘defend the Church from heresy’. The Vatican itself describes the congregation and its role as below:

Founded in 1542 by Pope Paul III with the Constitution “Licet ab initio,” the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was originally called the Sacred Congregation of the Universal Inquisition as its duty was to defend the Church from heresy. It is the oldest of the Curia's nine congregations. [...] Today, according to Article 48 of the Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia, “Pastor Bonus”, promulgated by the Holy Father John Paul II on June 28, 1988, “the duty proper to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is to promote and safeguard the doctrine on the faith and morals throughout the Catholic world: for this reason everything which in any way touches such matter falls within its competence.” (Vatican)

The carefully chosen language is important here: ‘safeguard[ing] the doctrine of the faith and morals throughout the Catholic world’. Here we can see that the business of the CDF is truly international and concerned with ‘everything which in any way touches such matters’ as morals or faith. In one reading, it could be understood that there is little that does not ‘in any way touch’ issues of morals and faith.

The Roman Catholic Church has a complex but highly ordered hierarchy to maintain control and discipline. No other institution, certainly no other religious institution, shares such a system. To critics of the Roman Catholic Church this system makes the Church closer to a capitalist multinational corporation than

anything else and perhaps this is not an unfair comparison.⁸ Much like a multinational corporation, the Roman Catholic Church is dependent on top-down centralized discipline and management to maintain control.

Discipline within Protestant Churches is generally decentralized.⁹ Practically, this means that all that holds Protestant Churches together is a shared rejection of Papal authority over the Church. It is understood to be the responsibility of each individual Church to set the rules of their liturgical practice and belief. Unlike Protestantism, the Roman Catholic Church has built up a strong central institutional core that regulates, disciplines, and manages the wide collection of Catholics to prevent dissolution of adherence. This strong central administrative core is the Roman Curia, made up of the Congregations. The Roman Curia is interesting and important because it is the only institutional administration that has a legal system whose decisions are based on and underwritten by theology. The role of the Roman Curia is described as such by the Vatican in the *Christus Dominus*; 'In exercising supreme, full, and immediate power in the universal Church, the Roman pontiff makes use of the departments of the Roman Curia which, therefore, perform their duties in his name and with his authority for the good of the churches and in the service of the sacred pastors' (Pope Paul VI 1965).

⁸ An example of such a popular opinion can be found in The Economist, 'The Catholic Church in America: Earthly Concerns', 2012.

⁹ Although the Anglican Communion has episcopal structures, this is much to do with its history as a protestanised Catholic Church.

Thus it is particularly interesting to examine the way in which dissenters from centralized legal authority are treated within Roman Catholicism. Those who claim to receive communication from the divine disrupt this highly organized structure of power, and, as such, are worthy of particular examination. Studying such individuals gives us information about how the administrative section of the Roman Catholic Church deals with them, which in turn illuminates the workings and structure of the organization.¹⁰

This poses great problems for the hierarchical structure of an organization that is on one view entirely concerned with the transcendent and on another view, practically entirely concerned with the immanent. No other institution manages to bridge this wide schism. The bridging of this schism, I argue, is achieved by carefully controlling those who would disrupt the judiciously defined boundaries essential to the maintenance of this balance. These people, I argue, are the actively abjected.

¹⁰ These claims raise important questions about the ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church which I am unable to explore here. Broadly, it could be argued that, if my thesis is correct, it implies that the Roman Catholic Church *potentially* prioritizes hierarchal, political and ecclesiastical authority over the word of God Himself. This is the claim of some of the individuals claiming dialogue with the divine whom the Church has not recognised as 'legitimate' channels of divinity. This, in turn, raises the question of what the purpose of the Roman Catholic Church is, and perhaps specifically what the purpose of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is. It may be legitimate to ask who and what the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith is protecting, and from whom or what. If my thesis of the actively abjected stands, then it is possible - whether intentionally or not - that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ignores Dogma over Doctrine, by focusing on the protection and defense of Dogma and in some cases Doctrine, Revealed and written thousands of years ago.

Philosophical Resources

The individuals whose texts I study and use in this thesis largely share characteristics with, or are labelled as, ‘mystics’. This term is broad and encompasses people who would be considered part of the Catholic Church as well as people who fall decidedly outside of it. For this reason, in Chapter One of this thesis I locate my study in the scholarly work on mysticism. Here, I sketch out how my thesis engages with the existing literature by demonstrating how mysticism has historically been divided into passive and active forms, and how individuals who claim to have dialogue with the divine have been made to fit into either one or the other of these models. I then engage with scholarship that attempts to move beyond this binary, and show how my thesis is part of this tradition. Ultimately, individuals who claim dialogue with the divine do not fit the standard or any other of the models of mysticism currently on offer. All of these models emphasize passivity and lack of agency on the part of the ‘mystic’ herself. The individuals I identify in this study do not experience a one-sided passive noetic communication with the divine; they experience dialogue. I show that for some purported mystics a *dialogue*, rather than passive reception, is at the centre of a model of communication with the divine. This distinction and the exploration of its importance makes up Chapter Two.

The work of two philosophers concerned with social justice and political emancipation will form a framework for my argument. What became apparent from

my study of the texts of the women who claimed communication with the divine was that those who took action effected the most change. Moreover, these women took a very particular type of action, which involved an awareness of the effect that action would have on the wider community, as well as on the individual taking the action. Every time, too, the action taken always singled out the individual taking it as a revolutionary in some form. These two conditions align with Hannah Arendt's understanding of action within her tripartite conception of human activities (Arendt 1958). I use the way that Arendt conceptualizes action in *The Human Condition* to develop my description of the phenomenon I call active abjection. I explore how and why I use Arendt's conceptions in depth in Chapter Three.

At first, it seemed as though individuals who took this particular type of action were simply scapegoated by their religious communities. But the further I explored, the clearer it became that something more complex was occurring than simple rejection of these individuals or scapegoating. I argue that a form of what Julia Kristeva calls *abjection* applies to these individuals. Abjection is neither rejection nor scapegoating, but is instead a term used to describe the treatment of certain substances that fit neither subject nor object category. 'The abject is an ambiguous non-thing (neither this nor that, both inside-outside, such as bodily fluids) which by its transitional or liminal position on the threshold calls into question the clean and clear divisions necessary for the functionality of the symbolic order' (Joy et al. 2002).

As Morny Joy writes, abject substances ‘are felt to be intrinsically abhorrent; the disgust experienced by their proximity is felt so strongly that the individual believes her response to be natural, universal and absolute’ (Joy et al. 2002). I argue that certain individuals who claim dialogue with the divine and take action in response to, or because of, this dialogue, become the abject of the Roman Curia: the Roman Curia actively abjects these individuals. I discuss abjection, and my specific development of the term in Chapter Four.

My working hypothesis is that these actively abjected people are constituted by the overlap of the three categories I discuss in Chapters Two, Three, and Four: the actively abjected are those individuals who claim dialogue with the divine, take action based on this dialogue, and are abjected.

The role of the institution in performing the abjection of these individuals is one important way in which I develop the concept of abjection. Just as ‘Racism is not confined to thoughts, utterances, and deeds, but finds its most important embodiment in institutions’ (Bernasconi 2003), I argue that any form of oppression finds its most important and most effective embodiment in institutions. Much like Bernard McGinn, who argues that tensions that exist between those who are endorsed by the Church and those who are expelled ‘are not merely accidental, the result of the bad will of heretics or the mistakes and incomprehension of authority figures, but they are also partly the result of inherent issues, pressure points if you will, in the relation of mysticism and magisterium in the history of Christianity’, I

attempt to unpack and examine what those inherent issues and pressure points are, and more importantly, how, once we are aware of them, we can reduce them as we move forward (McGinn 2004).

A Note on Translations

Most of the texts I engage with are written in or translated into English. Where I consider the translation to be particularly important to the meaning of a certain text, or uniquely problematic, I engage with the text in its original language and offer my own translations from either French, German or Latin. So, for example, I translate a small but vital footnote quoting Rudolph Otto from the German, but a larger quotation from a secondary commentary is cited in its translation. I translate texts that do not already exist in English editions.

This means that I quote in English translation some secondary commentaries which Kristeva originally wrote in French. Although an English translation of Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* is available, Kristeva's work is notoriously difficult to translate and contentious in its meaning in both French and English. Because this text forms the basis of one third of my argument I have chosen to use the text in the original language throughout, and translate the parts I quote of it into English myself to ensure I am happy with the meaning. Where my translation is exactly the same as the published translation I cite the latter so that the quotation can be easily

found. Where a secondary text cites Kristeva I follow their convention quoting them directly.

Chapter One: Mysticism: an Influential but Problematic Category

In this chapter, I locate my study within theological scholarship on mysticism. Before I can explain the need for the category I call the actively abjected, I must engage with a discussion about mysticism because those who fit the role of the actively abjected are more often than not pulled from the ranks of those termed ‘mystic’. Indeed, most of the textual material I discuss almost exclusively fits within a broader discussion of mysticism and mystical theology. The women I present as examples of the actively abjected are also often understood as ‘mystics’. The term mystic ‘since the thirteenth century, had increasingly come to designate ‘what had become separate from the institution’’ (De Certeau, 1979: 112). It was used ‘within and in reference to groups that were furthest removed from the theological institution; like many proper nouns, it first took the form of a nickname or accusatory term’ (Bucur 2013: 133).

Many of those who hold the characteristics of the actively abjected were beguines: members of lay religious orders who lived in semi-monastic communities, but refused to take formal religious vows because they valued their autonomy and freedom to worship as they pleased. Beguine communities were always on the fringe of the Roman Catholic Church by their very nature, but by the fourteenth century they became an active target for persecution during the inquisition. In 1312

the Council of Vienne directly attacked the ‘mystical ideas’ attributed to the beguines (Tarrant 1974). Quite aptly, beguine spirituality was ‘traditionally referred to as the heresy of the Free Spirit (*secta libertatis spiritus*)’ (McGinn 2004b: 196). Indeed the term ‘mystic’, as we will go on to see, has been used time and again to describe those who come up against ecclesiastical authority. In this thesis I shall show how all of those labelled the actively abjected can be considered Free Spirits, due to their abjection which in turn was due to their action, which in turn was due to their dialogue with the divine. It is important to recognise that the actively abjected are individuals who have at some point in their history been considered theological or social troublemakers.

In the final section of this chapter I will briefly outline the main elements of my thesis. But first I need to review the scholarly literature to which my argument is a response. The extant scholarship on mysticism has tended to categorise those who are broadly understood to be ‘mystics’, as well as their actions, into one of two ‘types’: that of ‘passive’ or ‘active’ mysticism. More recent work has problematized this binary and scholars such as Grace Jantzen and Denys Turner have taken a broader, more socially located, view of the phenomena generally understood as mysticism. They approach the study of purported mystics without heeding this binary. My project is broadly within this latter tradition. However, the model I offer for the actively abjected is distinct from either Jantzen’s or Turner’s work for several important reasons.

Before I outline these reasons, I will trace the development of the binary understanding of mysticism. My focus will be on the work of William James and Evelyn Underhill as these thinkers are illustrative of the scholarship and motivation that lies behind the categorisation of these two ‘types’. It is also important to recognise that within the Roman Catholic tradition, people who are considered mystics are generally understood to be people who have been endorsed as such by the Church. In this chapter I will explore a collection of important questions regarding this relationship. I shall return to some pressing questions that have been explored in some depth by Jantzen, showing how my thought diverges from hers in significant ways even if the questions we both ask are initially similar.

The Roman Curia

As I discussed in the introduction, this thesis focuses on the actions of the Roman Curia regarding people who claim to be in dialogue with the divine. Therefore it is important to outline the general attitude taken by the congregations of the Roman Curia when assessing those who claim to have unmediated access to the divine.

The Roman Catholic Church has a particular and legislated process for the definition and validation of individuals as beatified, and for events to be considered ‘blessings’ or miracles. Since 1588, an entire congregation of the Holy See, since 1988 named The Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, has the role of collecting, organizing, and judging evidence of miracles and mystical experiences

presented to them by members of the clergy. The evaluation of purported mystics is a serious concern which involves substantial amounts of time, energy, and capital. This congregation is different to, but works alongside, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: the congregation with which I engage in this thesis the most.

Although the role of the mystic within all religious traditions has been contested and debated, traditional Catholic doctrine teaches that particular individuals are chosen by God to receive certain experiences - labelled as gifts - the purpose of which is to evidence the love of God for humankind. Time and again, those who suffer 'mystical experiences' such as the wounds and passion of Christ have been told by Roman Catholic ecclesiastic authorities that their suffering has a quality of atonement. Those who understand stigmata, for instance, to be genuine manifestations of supernatural power claim that the 'stigmata, allegedly indicates that an individual so heavily identifies with Christ that they express the marks of the crucifixion' (Krippener 2002).

Catherine of Sienna is a famous example of such mystical experience being understood as atonement for. She increased her own physical sufferings so as to be a better vessel for the atonement of sins of humankind (Starr Costello 1988). We are told that stigmatics such as Catherine (although, at her request, her wounds were not visible to the eye) are 'living miracles' and 'his most chosen souls, who become transformed into living crucifixes by sharing His passion for the redemption of the world' (Freze 1989). The implications of understanding the purpose of mystical

experience are wide ranging: most simply, Roman Catholic tradition teaches that only the purest, most perfect victim-worthy souls are chosen to perform this role, not ordinary individuals.

Those labelled as mystics in Roman Catholic theology are not simply recognizably 'other'. What is common to all those labelled 'mystic' by the Church is that they are identified as being other to everydayness, other to the ordinary, and other to the normal Catholic religious practice of connection to the divine. Those labelled as mystics by the Roman Curia distinguish themselves, often unconsciously and unintentionally, by gaining access to the divine through means other than those laid out by ecclesiastical authority. The labelling of such individuals as mystics (only done after their death) is a way in which the ecclesiastical authorities can harness this power and gain authority over it. Individuals who claim to be experiencing unmediated access to God establish this relationship through direct and personal routes. In the case of those I identify as the actively abjected, if this power is unable to be harnessed by the ecclesiastical authorities for any reason (perhaps because the individual takes action that is seen as running against the doctrine of the Church, or the personal characteristics of the individual are not considered appropriately 'pure') this power is turned into an otherness that is to be feared and expelled from the community. This is what I identify as abjection.

If one follows a theology that claims that it is possible for God to communicate to some few chosen souls in order to have impact on Earth, then Roman Catholic

mystics exist, one could argue, because those in authority within the Roman Catholic Church are making mistakes. By abjecting certain individuals who effect change, and in the process creating the actively abjected, those in authority play the role of liberator. This is so even though the process occurs by default, i.e. I contend that whether or not they are aware of this process those with administrative and political authority with the Catholic Church create the category of the actively abjected: a category of people who have an active role in shaping the doctrine and practice of the Church.¹¹

In this thesis I assume two things: (1.) that God is good and (2.) that liberation from oppression is necessary. Therefore, it is possible to understand the actively abjected as an individual who is doing the Church's work, even if in doing so, she is expelled from it.

The Mystical Binary: Passive vs. Active

To explore the way in which the Roman Curia addresses and participates in discussions with those who claim a particular relationship with the divine, it is essential to understand and locate this treatment within the broader scholarly understanding of mysticism. There is a 'standard model' of mysticism which congregates around a collection of phenomena. According to Bernard McGinn,

¹¹ Of course when applying this model to other religious or spiritual institutions it remains those who have the administrative and/or political authority who do the abjecting.

‘mysticism has an essence, nature or set of fundamental characteristics’ (McGinn 2004b). The reason mysticism is so important and influential within theology as well as wider culture is simple: these fundamental characteristics consistently congregate around a relationship with the divine. It follows that when we talk of mysticism, we are attempting to talk about the experience of personal transformation brought about by some form of contact with God. At least this is what the ‘standard model’ claims.

But according to this standard model of mysticism is not just any relationship with God, it is a relationship with God that is at one and the same time deeply personal and particular but has wider communal implications. These communal implications interest me the most and have the greatest importance to my argument. Moreover, there are socio-political implications for this relationship. When one claims to have unmediated access to God, one claims great authority. Mystics, people who claim a specifically communicative relationship to the divine, hold immense power to shape and influence the religious communities that they are associated with. Likewise, and I think more significantly, who such religious communities choose to describe and treat as a mystic serves to sustain a particular theological status quo.

Mysticism and therefore the definition of mystics, like anything connected intrinsically with the distribution of power, has maintained and been a product of gender and sexual difference. When we study mysticism we uncover a collection of power dynamics and, as Grace Jantzen says, ‘in particular the assertion of male

ecclesiastical authority over women visionaries and any other challengers to it' (Jantzen 1995).

The question of how mystics are labelled, and how religious communities choose certain people as mystics, requires critical engagement. 'Mystics' do not arrive in religious communities fully formed. They are created and validated by a collection of authorities and through formalized processes. Whether we are discussing famous female mystics such as Teresa of Avila or lesser known parochial holy men within sub-Saharan Africa, purported mystics go through a collection of experiences, tests, and engagements with religious and communal authority, that ultimately result in their being labelled as the mystic.

The way in which these individuals are 'validated' and the way in which their experiences are processed (if "experience" is even the correct term) are therefore important to explore and unpack. As one of the most influential writers of mysticism, Michele de Certeau writes:

The structures of society; the terms in which it voices its aspirations, the objective and subjective forms of the common conscience, build up the religious conscience, which in turn manifests them...A particular type of society and a particular balance (including the essential elements of the significance of power...) are reflected in the problems of spiritual experience (de Certeau 1966).

I intend to explore and uncover the structures of the Roman Curia, and wider religious society, that manifest certain specific power dynamics in the way in these

structures engage with certain individuals who have a type of ‘spiritual experience’. It is essential to address spiritual experience as de Certeau claims. I conclude that there are a certain collection of individuals who do not adequately fit into the standard model of mysticism, and that these people and the category they inhabit – the actively abjected – tells us something important about the structures of power that exist within the Roman Curia and within society more generally.

What becomes clear when studying the texts of purported mystics in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as those who are not validated as such but who claim to dialogue with the divine, is that the way their contact with the divine is understood, is as either ‘passive’ or ‘active’. ‘Mystical experience’ according to the standard model (one which congregates around a relationship with the divine) is structured this binary.

I shall argue that this standard model of mysticism is significantly inadequate. The ‘standard model’ as I shall call the conglomeration of various traditional - and traditionally accepted - definitions of mysticism, is based upon something termed ‘mystical experience’, and the various ways of understanding this experience, either that it is something passive, or something that one can actively invite.¹²

¹² Although I use the term traditional with some caution with reference to mysticism, as Jeffrey Kripal writes ‘Like other terms that seem to be natural or eternal, “mysticism” in fact is fundamentally a project of modernity, coming into wide use as a noun only in the twentieth century, and then primarily in a theologically liberal context’ Kripal, J. in Robert Alan Segal, *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (Malden, Mass; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) xix, 471 p. at 322.

What we see when we study ‘mystical experience’ is that what is broadly understood to be ‘mystical’ is defined by the work of William James. This Jamesian definition of mystical experience has become the foundation upon which definitions of mysticism (and therefore anyone who claims to have experiences that correlate to this definition) are based. Thus if we are to understand the standard model of mysticism, we need to look to a Jamesian understanding of mystical experience first.¹³

William James is still considered the authority on mystical experience. His book *The Varieties of religious Experience*, was the first to engage with the complex psychological factors at play when one claims to encounter out of the ordinary ‘supernatural’ events. Previous to *Varieties*, those who had written on religious

¹³ After James’s *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, Rudolph Otto wrote about the numinous in Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über Des Irrationale in Der Idee Des Göttlichen Und Sein Verhältnis Zum Rationalen* (16. Aufl edn.; Gotha: Leopold Klotz, 1927) xi, 258 p. (The Holy - About the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational), the published English translation being *The Idea of the Holy*. Here Otto argues that all religious experiences have what he terms ‘the numinous’ in common- the numinous itself has two elements: *mysterium tremendum* –that which causes fear and trembling; and *mysterium fascinans*, that which attracts, fascinates and compels. Otto was keen to define the holy carefully and argued that ‘Wir haben uns nämlich gewöhnt, ‘heilig’ in einem Sinne zu gebrauchen, der ein durchaus übertragener, keineswegs sein ursprünglicher ist. Wir verstehen es nämlich gewöhnlich als das absolute sittliche Prädikat, als vollendet gut.’ (We have become accustomed to using “holy” in a sense that is thoroughly conferred and in no way original. Namely, we understand it usually as the absolute moral (sittlich) predicate, the complete (vollendet) good.” [Translation mine] Otto asserts that the numinous is not to be confused with the absolute good – it does not have a moral quality. Otto, *Das Heilige: Über Des Irrationale in Der Idee Des Göttlichen Und Sein Verhältnis Zum Rationalen* at 5.

experience did so with different intentions and interests. Those writing on religious experience were either theologians whose interests lay in using religious experience as a form of evidence of the existence of God, or those who had experienced the type of sensations or processes James writes about themselves – the mystics, if you will. Although there were scholars who had written on mania, delusions, and psychoses (termed different things at the time), none had participated in discussion of the phenomena in the scholarly, methodical, and psychological way that James did.¹⁴ Indeed, James himself describes how ‘The words “mysticism” and “mystical” are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague’ (James and Ferrari 2002).

Varieties is notable for many reasons. The text evidences James’s pragmatism - a philosophical movement he helped develop, which was, after the publication of *Varieties*, to become hugely influential. So too is his understanding that the value of an object or indeed, movement, ought to be disconnected from the study of the object or movement itself. So that even if the woman claiming to be receiving divine communication is diagnosed as mentally ill, the value of her testimony is not to be disregarded along with her mental health. This last point is important for my argument as I will show how much of how religious institutions of power attempt

¹⁴ For a fascinating history and critical engagement with the hermeneutical issues raised by those claiming communion with the divine who were believed to be possessed, see Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, & Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

to do just this – disregard the content and value of a testimony, when the testifier herself is discredited.

James's definition of mystical experience remains hugely important. Definitions of any concept help set the course of future scholarship. Like other terms such as truth, right, and sensation, the term experience remains the subject of debate and scrutiny. What James provided was a neat and convenient definition of mystical experience that seems to satisfy the general sense of the term. For this reason it is the definition which has become the foundation for the standard model of mysticism.¹⁵

James's understanding of mystical experience is elegant. For James, a mystical experience must possess four characteristics:

(1) Ineffability: this is described by James as that which 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words' (James 2002: 295). Following from this, ineffable experiences are those which cannot be communicated. In the communication itself, something of the quality of the experience is lost.

(2) Noetic quality: Mystical experiences are often understood by those who have them as being 'states of knowledge' (James 2002: 295).

(3) Transiency: Mystical experiences cannot be sustained for long.

(4) Passivity: 'When the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power' (James 2002: 295).

¹⁵ It is perhaps not surprising that there is much of value to be found in James's model of mysticism, as according to Jeremy Carrette, James was at pains to 'sustain a conversation across the disciplinary spaces of philosophy, psychology and the study of religion' *Jeremy R. Carrette, William James's Hidden Religious Imagination : A Universe of Relations* (New York / London: Routledge, 2015).

This way of defining mystical experience has gone largely unchallenged and unchanged since 1902 - with Evelyn Underhill's challenges standing as a notable exception - and for good reason: it was the first proper attempt to categorise a collection of experiences that were previously only talked about as being vaguely related.

In what follows, my main aim is not to offer a new definition, but to show how much of the texts written by purported mystics do not fit this model. Perhaps the most obviously problematic yet influential of all of James's categories is the last; that mystical experience is characterised by passivity. It is not surprising that James should include passivity in his definition because the religious and spiritual tradition that he draws most of his evidence from has always associated passivity and submission with encounters with God. Moreover, most purported mystics and therefore most of those who therefore fall under James's definitions are women, and submission and passivity have also been long associated with femininity.¹⁶ William James's definition of religious/mystical experience thus falls into the passive camp.¹⁷

¹⁶ Even if in practice women, even 'feminine' women, are neither submissive or passive.

¹⁷ The distinction between religious experience and mystical experience is subtle: religious experience is a mystical experience that is had or understood within the framework of a specific religious tradition. In this way, a vision of the Virgin Mary can be both a religious and mystical experience, whereas an experience of being contacted by a Higher Power may only be understood as a mystical experience. Religious experiences are generally mystical experiences that confirm or endorse an individual's religious belief.

This idea of mystical experience as passive, is not accurate, although it is widespread and generally held to be the case. Although most mystical texts share an expression of the mystics' will being shaped by the divine, they generally do not express a sense of having their will and agency removed by God. There is an important distinction between influence and complete removal of agency. Texts written by purported mystics do not describe passivity in any form, instead they portray a relationship. Admittedly, often these relationships can be considered to be unhealthy, especially for liberals who value autonomy and individualism, but they describe relationships nonetheless.¹⁸

If James represents the idea of mysticism as passive, then Evelyn Underhill, in her challenges to James and her definition of mysticism, represents mysticism as active. Underhill was one of the most important writers on mysticism in the early 20th century and is still regarded as an authority. Indeed, one of the main themes of Underhill's writing is precisely the question of '*What is Mysticism?*' (Underhill 2007: 1). She is clear that any answer to that question will be inadequate, and yet attempts a definition despite this:

¹⁸ As we will see in Chapter Two, not only is the communication that characterises James's definition and categorising of mystical experiences not passive, in Chapter Three I show how what James considers to be 'a' mystical experience is in fact an event or collection of events that leads to action in many cases. It may therefore be more helpful to think of mystical experience not only as a one-off 'transient' event, as James describes it in the third of his four categories, but instead to argue that mystical experience, as far as that term is helpful at all, is better understood as a life-long way of being. And that rather than that way of being passive and transient, it is in many cases, active and permanent.

Broadly speaking, I understand it to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called “mystic union,” attains its end. Whether that end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy, the desire to attain it and the movement towards it—so long as this is a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation—is the proper subject of mysticism. I believe this movement to represent the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness (Underhill 1930: 8).

Underhill’s most important divergence from James’s definition of mysticism is on the point of practicality and passivity. She thinks purported mysticism is only proper mysticism when it is ‘a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation’. It is ‘the science or art of the spiritual life’ (Underhill 1930: 6). In this regard, the part of my argument concerned with political action is indebted more to Underhill and her work than James (or indeed any other scholar of mysticism). For Underhill, mysticism is not an experience that one keeps separate from other lived experiences; it is a lived experience.

Underhill engages directly with James’s four characteristics of religious experience, but a point often missed - I fail to find this mentioned anywhere - is that James was explicitly defining characteristics of an experience which qualify it as ‘mystical or religious’, whereas Underhill claims James is defining mysticism *as a whole*, and goes on to offer her alternative definition of the same. There is an important distinction between these two things: one is a category of experience, the other a way of being (or, more recently, an academic discipline). Underhill’s conflation of

a certain type of experience with a way of being in the world demonstrates, better than any quotation from her texts that her understanding of mysticism is much more than an experience or experiences. For Underhill, mysticism is practical.

As I go on to build up my argument for the actively abjected, I will show that a key quality of this figure is their propensity to take action. To be someone who fits the category of the actively abjected, one must not only have a mystical experience of the type described by James (or indeed, of another type), but one must put this event to practical use. This practical use is described in more depth by the second of my three categories, and is the subject of Chapter Two: Action^A. Although the importance of practicality in Underhill's work resonates with my argument, her specific conception of practicality differs from what I go on to propose. Underhill's concept of practical mysticism lies in a training of the mind to be more focused on what she terms Reality. It is a *specific practice* more than a collection of actions.¹⁹

Underhill's alternative four characteristics of mysticism are as follows:

- (1) True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion.

¹⁹ The distinction here between practice and action is important. A practice is an action one repeats with a view to improvement, action being an act towards a certain goal, but it is not necessarily repeated in the same way. In conversation with Constantine Sandis, I found his definition helpful to use as a basis for this distinction: 'some actions are parts of practices and engaging in a practice is a kind of action, but the practice itself is not an action.' (Personal communication 16/06/2014)

(2) Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe. The mystic brushes aside that universe, even in its supernormal manifestations. Though he does not, as his enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many, his heart is always set upon the changeless One.

(3) This One is for the mystic, not merely the Reality of all that is, but also a living and personal Object of Love; never an object of exploration. It draws his whole being homeward, but always under the guidance of the heart.

(4) Living union with this One—which is the term of his adventure—is a definite state or form of enhanced life. It is obtained neither from an intellectual realization of its delights, nor from the most acute emotional longings. Though these must be present they are not enough. It is arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process—the so-called Mystic Way—entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent, form of consciousness; which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called "ecstasy," but is better named the Unitive State (Underhill 1930: 77-78)

Three years after *Mysticism* was published, Underhill was to offer a related but distinct definition of mysticism. In 1914, in *Practical Mysticism*, a ‘little book for normal people’ she writes, ‘Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment’ (Underhill 2007: 2). This newer definition seems in many ways to be less helpful – for what does Reality mean? Underhill recognizes this of course, but her broad definition is intentional. She wants to say that unity is the only way in which we truly experience anything, and rather than it being a ‘rare and unimaginable operation’ it is something which we are all doing ‘in a vague, imperfect fashion, at every moment of conscious life; and doing with intensity and thoroughness in all the more valid moments of that life’ (Underhill 2007: 2).

If mysticism is ‘the art of unity with Reality’, and unity is the only way we experience anything at all, does this mean that every moment of consciousness is, at least potentially, mystical? It would seem that for Underhill, the only distinction between mysticism and daily being-in-the-world is that certain events of unity or perhaps practices of unity are considered by Underhill to be more valid than others.

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So what constitutes validity? For Underhill, it relates back to her concept of Reality (with a capital ‘R’). She thinks:

...the distinction between mystic and non-mystic is not merely that between the rationalist and the dreamer, between intellect and intuition. The question which divides them is really this: What, out of the mass of material offered to it, shall consciousness seize upon—with what aspects of the universe shall it “unite”? (Underhill 2007: 2).

According to this model, the mystic is distinguished from the non-mystic because she unites with things as they ‘really are’ and not with the appearance of things brought to her via her senses (Underhill 2007: 3). This understanding of mysticism as practice that results in a knowing that surpasses the senses, is characteristically Neoplatonic. Although she does not say this, Underhill is considering practical mysticism as *henosis*: the classical Greek term for Unity with The One. Plotinus, considered by some to be ‘the father of Western mysticism’ (Rist 1967: 213)

²⁰ Of course *Practical Mysticism* was written long before Martin Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* with its in depth discussion of In-der-Welt Sein - although it would be an interesting project to connect the thinking of these two scholars on this issue. I shall pursue this elsewhere.

describes this experience first-hand in his *Enneads* (Plotinus et al. 1991). This experience was one where ‘the beholder and the beheld were united’ (Ustinova, in Cardaña and Winkelman 2011: 67).

Underhill’s project was two-fold: first that of emphasizing the role of communion or union in all human nature, and second that of distinguishing between a union with that which is Real and that which is simply illusion. For Underhill, practical mysticism is the active heonsistic practice of developing and training oneself to unite with the Real.²¹

Both James’s and Underhill’s attempts at defining mystical experience and mysticism continue to shape current discussions of the field/experience/events broadly collected under ‘mysticism’ and each illustrate the binary of passive vs. active mysticism. Almost all scholarly engagements with mysticism since the publication of *Varieties* and *Mysticism* have been engagements with James and Underhill. As such they have been engagements with this binary. (As evidenced by recent work on James and religiosity, such as that by Jeremy Carrette (2015)). There

²¹ William Alston challenges this definition of mysticism and its implied taxonomy of experiences. He remarks that ‘by no means all experiences selected by my criterion [of mystical experience] are, phenomenologically, experiences of undifferentiated unity’ He continues in an endnote: ‘it may be argued, of course, that the unitary experiences are more ‘highly developed’, but even if that is true by some standards, my point remains.’ Alston in Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford University Press, 1992) at 100-01. I think this challenge is important – a taxonomy of experience is problematic for many reasons. W.Alston Literal and Non-Literal in Reports of Mysticism in Katz, *Mysticism and Language* at 81.

are also those who would engage with the content of that which James and Underhill categorized as ‘mystical’ but who reject the term as a modern invention.²²

So far, we have seen how challenging it is to define mystic, mysticism, and mystical experience, and how easily (and often erroneously) these notions are conflated. Most importantly, it is significant to recognise the distinction between passive versus active mysticism: the distinction between the mystic passively awaiting the grace of God to gift her with ‘mystical experience’, and the mystic actively cultivating a spiritual nature, an environment, if you will, whereby God can more easily be heard.

The distinction between passive and active can also be understood in terms of object and subject. The passive mystic is objectified: she is an empty vessel waiting to be filled by God (I lack the space to consider the sexualised resonances of this idea in relation to the maintenance of the conception of women mystics as historically passive). The active mystic has subjectivity: she is an agent who uses her agency to (in the Underhillian understanding) cultivate a relationship with God. My argument

²² Perhaps most important of these is Michel de Certeau. de Certeau did much more than simply question the use and meaning of the mystical, however, and his work on the role of the mystic is important to my argument. But to remain focused on the subject of this chapter, specifically the definition and understanding of the term ‘mystic’, ‘mystical’ and ‘mysticism’, it is important to point out here that de Certeau considered these terms and their use, later to include academic use, as a particular story of language change and use. He argues that mysticism as a genre was created as such (Certeau and Massumi 1986: 81). For de Certeau, mysticism and mystical theology is a genre of writing.

is that neither of these models are adequate, in large part because ‘mystical experience’, specifically the experience of claiming to be in dialogue with the divine, prevents the individual claiming it from fully occupying either role. It is for this reason that individuals who claim dialogue with the divine ‘naturally’ (if one can use the term at all) occupy the space of ab-ject. As I will explain in more detail, the abject is that which is nether object nor subject. It is the liminal, the in-between.

I am not the only scholar to have claimed that the binary categorisation of passive versus active is not accurate. And although the ‘standard model’ of mysticism is one based upon James’s broadly unchallenged definition of mystical experience, with influences from the writings of Underhill, it is not entirely based upon the work of these thinkers. Not all understandings of mysticism accept this binary.

For example, Jeffrey Kripal offers a definition of mysticism that seems both helpful and unhelpful in its breadth, and one that seems to reflect accurately the more contemporary understanding of mysticism within the academic theological community. According to Kripal, ‘Mysticism is a modern comparative category that has been used in a wide variety of ways to locate, describe, and evaluate individuals’ experiences of communion, union, or identity with the sacred’ (Kripal 2006: 21). He thinks it is not even necessary that an individual feels their union with the divine simply that which is *associated* with the divine will suffice. In this way, Kripal’s definition moves mystical experience one step further away from direct

union with God; you do not need to feel communion with God herself, being able to identify with that which is associated with God is enough to qualify.

There is much to be said in support of such a broad understanding of the term mysticism. For one, it does not exclude people who have certain experiences which would fit James's four categories but for whom a concept of the divine is not apparent. But there are also problems with the definition. Despite mysticism being, as Kripal states, 'fundamentally a project of modernity', the experiences that have become labelled as 'mystical' and that are discussed in depth (and sometimes in less depth) by scholars of 'mysticism' are not projects of modernity, and historically (which in this context means before modernity – pre 17th century), these experiences were very much associated with the divine, and not just associated with those things associated with the divine (Kripal 2006: 322).

It occurs to me that it is characteristic of 'modern projects' to accentuate the distance between experience and expression of that experience.²³ This may be part of the desire to 'understand' things that has dominated philosophical projects since the Enlightenment; the idea that everything is understandable if we ask the correct questions. Kripal's extension of the definition does just this. It is not that mystical events or experiences did not exist before the modern period, but rather than the

²³ Husserl's project of phenomenology was an attempt to critique this of course; a critique taken up by Heidegger. It is in *Logical Investigations* that Husserl lays the foundations for his Phenomenology. See Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

collection of experiences we understand as mysticism were not understood as even being collected together in the way we understand them to be now (in a manner that makes their grouping seem ‘natural’ or obvious). Moreover, they formed part of different dialogues, and were part of different theological, political, and socio-economic projects than those they are a part of now.

Kripal’s broad definition of mysticism goes some way towards removing the ‘experiences’ we would now understand as part of mysticism from their original locatedness and therefore meaning. Of course his point is that when we speak of ‘mysticism’ we are actually talking about a modern invention. But it is important to mark the distinction between the discipline of ‘mysticism’ or even ‘mystical theology’, and a collection of experiences and writings that make up that discipline. The latter ought not to be plucked from their historical, social, and theological contexts and thrown into the academic melting pot.

To take just one example, Teresa’s painstakingly edited testimony of her experience of ecstasy cannot meaningfully be labelled as ‘the same thing’ as contemporary ideas of feeling ‘at one with’ nature. Therefore, it may seem surprising that my project engages with, and to some extent utilises, the testimonies and works of women from such a disparate collection of times, communities, and places. However, my intention is not to claim that the testimony of St Teresa of Avila is ‘the same’ as the testimony of a contemporary woman claiming dialogue with Jesus. Instead, I aim to trace a commonality of experience, a commonality of language,

and most importantly a commonality of treatment and reception by the Roman Curia that can be found in all the examples I offer of the actively abjected.

Gender, Power, and Mysticism: Appropriation, Disenfranchisement, and Use

What these different scholarly texts offer us, then, are different definitions of mysticism, mystical experience, and the mystic. We can see that the dichotomy between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ forms of purported mysticism is unhelpful and does not adequately contain space for the variety of different experiences (for want of a better word) undergone by those who claim a unique relationship with the divine. Amongst other things, the texts demonstrate that ‘answers to questions of what mysticism is and of who counts as a mystic, though they will not be constant, will always reveal interconnected struggles of power and gender’ (Jantzen 1995: 2).

Grace Jantzen forms a compelling argument in *Gender, Power and Christian Mysticism*. She moves away from this binary of active and passive to focus on the socio-cultural factors that influence the validation of individuals as mystics. She argues that men control what has counted as ‘mystical’ and that these men intentionally excluded female voices in an (successful) attempt to maintain power. For Jantzen, it is not possible to speak of ‘Christian mysticism’ but rather Christian mysticisms, and that each of these different forms of mysticism are different

precisely because of their differing locatedness within frameworks of gender and power.

Nothing about this is particularly contentious. However, what is problematic is Jantzen's suggestion that the reason purported women mystics claimed contact with the divine in their texts was because that was the only way they could exercise authority in an explicitly patriarchal (and misogynistic) institutional context.

It is indisputable that women as a group in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries had less ecclesiastical authority than their male contemporaries.²⁴ It is also easy to note that some particular women gained a small amount of religious

²⁴ Although in response to a talk I gave on woman mysticism at St John's College, Oxford, Professor Oliver Davies claimed that it could be argued that 'some women' had 'equal or more power' than men, it was simply power of a different nature. Such an argument resembles the age-old 'equal but different' arguments of conservative patriarchal Christianity. Professor Davies's insistence that some women had equal or more power to the men in their cultures relies on a basic understanding that difference in role and power can in some way still manage to equal, "equality". The fundamental problem is not that certain individuals play a variety of different roles, it is that certain roles are intrinsically connected with power and authority and others are not, and that those roles that are associated with power and authority are the roles that men occupy. It is the policing of who can occupy these roles, and the maintenance of divisions along the lines of sex and gender that means that the 'equal but different' argument, popular amongst men in positions of power, is so harmful. It is a form of gender essentialism that supports or accepts the different roles of men and women as 'natural' and not indicative of oppression and it erases the lived reality of oppression and lack of freedom that women in the Church in the eleventh century (and to this day) encountered and experience/d. Hildegard of Bingen, a mystic so often brought out as an example of a woman with authority within the Church in the medieval period, could never gain actual legal authority within her institution simply because of her gender. Any authority she did manage to achieve was entirely dependent on the legitimate legal authority of the Pope at the time.

authority within their communities in connection with their claims of dialogue with the divine. But one cannot move from these facts to the claim that the *reason* these women claimed dialogue with the divine was to achieve this power. Whilst there may be some correlation between these things correlation is not causation and appeals to correlations cannot singlehandedly underpin arguments of this kind. Moreover, this kind of hasty argument is not lacking in implications. It is a substantive claim that, if we agree with it, would lead us to disregard all texts written by mystics who happen to be women, as fabricated. It is not acceptable to assert that women claimed they were having mystical experiences in order to gain power.

Jantzen is also guilty of gender essentialism. To claim that women are susceptible to mystical turns more than men, whatever the reason, is potentially arguable. There may be a whole collection of gendered, cultured and social factors that encourage the expression of certain experiences in women more than men. However, it is not readily defensible to claim that women who have mystical experiences have them in order to gain power. This line of argument is disempowering and disenfranchising. We may be able to see a correlation between those few women endorsed as mystics in the Church and an increase in their personal power and authority within the same religious community, but that is all we can note with confidence.

Either Jantzen thinks that individual mystics intentionally and strategically made up the experiences they claim to have, or else she thinks that they were passive victims who allowed themselves to believe that they were having experiencing that were not ‘real’ due to a collection of social influences. Neither option is adequate and neither option respects the (limited) agency and autonomy of the women she discusses. If the first option were the case, that Jantzen believes the mystics to have intentionally made up their experiences in order to gain power, then this is easy enough to refute: the texts of the mystics themselves simply do not support such a reading.

One reason to reject Jantzen’s argument is that it is abundantly clear from the majority of the texts written by women endorsed as mystics by the Church (and therefore the women who, according to Jantzen, would have gained power due to their claims to have dialogue with the divine), that they did not *desire* their experiences. Teresa, for example, spent twenty-eight years of her life trying to avoid the experiences underwent²⁵.

We can reject Jantzen’s argument for the second reason that is that it is far from clear that these experiences bestowed these women with any power at all, and certainly not in any straightforward way. It may be possible to argue that a few individuals such as Hildegard von Bingen achieved some level of protection from

²⁵ I discuss this in some depth in Chapter Two, but evidence of this can be found in Teresa and J. M. Cohen, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) 316 p.

the worst of patriarchal abuse, but as I will go on to show in the proceeding chapters, her claims to be speaking directly to Christ were not sufficient to protect her from the political workings of a significantly more powerful male prelate. Being a woman, Hildegard was not ever going to be able to achieve any level of real legitimate authority within the Church: her limited authority was fragile and entirely dependent on the contingent patronage of the highest authority within the Roman Church: the Pope himself.

If the second option is the case, i.e. Jantzen thinks that purported women mystics who claimed to have mystical experiences were simply erroneous in their belief; that due to a collection of social and cultural conditions they were ‘more susceptible’ to believe themselves capable of having visions of a specifically religious and supernatural nature, then we are still left with a problem. We can ask: How is Jantzen’s claim any different to the claims of the early psychiatrists who claimed various forms of mental illness, most often caused by patriarchal trauma, were simply ‘hysteria’? Why is she able to dismiss the testimony of so many women from her position of modern authority?

What appears at first to be a project much in line with my own is distinctly problematic. Jantzen’s assessment of female mystics perpetuates a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Theories of epistemic injustice are useful in addressing the problems implicit in the use of the information contained in mystical testimony. Miranda Fricker identifies two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial

injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice is an injustice brought about by the speaker's testimony being given a lower level of credibility due to the prejudice of others. An example of this would be a poor black woman's testimony not being considered as credible as that of the rich white man she accuses of abuse. It is the fact that she is poor, black, and a woman, that makes her considered to be less trustworthy than the rich white man. Jantzen is guilty of this testimonial injustice in her approach to female mystics. She dismisses the force and content of their testimony precisely because they are female, because their minority status purportedly implies that anything they talk about is spoken to acquire power, however implicitly, as opposed to asserting other content.²⁶

Hermeneutical injustice, 'occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences' (Fricker 2007: 1). It arises when a society or community has no framework to understand or even accept that a certain experience exists. Fricker uses the example of sexual harassment to illustrate this. Before it was recognized as an actual 'experience' with a label, the experiences of women suffering from bullying associated with their gender or sex was not considered a 'real' thing. Even today, in current Indian society, for example, sexual

²⁶ It should be noted here that Jantzen is most concerned with the role of the subconscious in the development of conscious action. This means that when reading the texts of women mystics, her approach is one that prioritizes, or rather emphasizes the subconscious motives of these women. A critique of Jantzen I hold is that she goes too far with this emphasis, to the point where the women she reads are not given any conscious agency at all. This, I argue, leads to epistemic injustice. I have actively intended to focus on the conscious and practical lived actions of the same women, and as this thesis develops, I focus on the Action that they take consciously and intentionally.

assault and rape is termed ‘Eve teasing’ – a label that acts to trivialize violence towards women, and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of a women’s social experience. Jantzen is guilty of hermeneutical injustice in the way in which she engages with women mystics because she cannot conceive of the experiences they claim to have other than as a manifestation of something else. Jantzen understands the ‘mystical experiences’ as nothing other than a performative tool used to attain authority. She cannot and does not understand them as religious or ‘spiritual’ events as such.

Another element of epistemic injustice, one that is it possible to see as an element of both testimonial and hermeneutic injustice, is identity power: ‘Whenever there is an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon such shared imaginative conceptions of social identity, then identity power is at work’ (Fricker 2007: 14). So here we can see testimonial injustice at play. When there exists a ‘collective conception of femininity as insufficiently rational because excessively intuitive’ we have hermeneutical injustice. The social collective conception of femininity, or more specifically feminine knowledge, is such that ‘a man might not need to do anything to silence her. She might already be silenced by the mere fact that he is a man and she a woman’ (Fricker 2007: 15).

The operation of identity power ‘does not require that either party consciously accept the stereotype as truthful’, it is not a form of epistemic injustice that relies upon individuals to be perpetuated, instead it is culturally perpetrated: ‘the primary

modus operandi of identity power is at the level of the collective social imagination' (Fricker 2007: 15). Like the 'mere fact' that a knower is a woman makes her testimony less valid, it seems that, for Jantzen, the fact that a knower is a mystic has the same effect. Moreover, the knowledge contained within mystical experiences as communicated by mystics, is in its very definition, unverifiable. Because mysticism is most often understood as an experience of communion with the divine that is deeply personal and particular, any attempt to validate it as 'true' will consistently fail. There is no way we can judge whether the mystics Jantzen dismisses as either having made up their experiences in order to gain power or else were mistaken in their belief that the experiences were 'real', were actually 'real'.

Jantzen claims, like de Certeau, 'that the idea of 'mysticism' is a social construction'. She goes on to say that 'it has been constructed in different ways at different times' (Jantzen 1995: 12). This is a fairly typical Foucauldian analysis of power structures and an analysis I concur with, in general terms. Indeed, much of my argument explores who is defined as a 'mystic', how they are defined, and the political and theological implications of this definition. The validation of an individual as a mystic is a power brokering. And thus the Foucauldian approach is useful here: rather than assume that there is any such essential Platonic 'form' of mysticism we can see that it is in fact impossible to identify a single definition of mysticism, and instead mysticism(s) are simply reflections and manifestations of the various different institutions of power that various mystics are the products of. A woman endorsed by the church as a mystic in 15th century Spain reflects, and is

a product of, the patriarchal and ecclesiastical culture and society that she lives in. Likewise, the contemporary woman who claims to be in dialogue with Jesus Christ, Vassula Ryden, is equally affected by differing power dynamics.

Because of these power dynamics it is possible, indeed fruitful, to understand various mystics throughout history as windows into the political and spiritual state of the church (or whichever spiritual institution they were validated by). Each mystic becomes a sort of individual historiography of the Church and society of their time. 'Put starkly, the church (and nowadays the university) will exert its power to determine who counts as a mystic, excluding from that category any who are threatening to its authority' (Jantzen 1995: 14). However, at this point my agreement with Jantzen comes to an end. I do not think, as Jantzen claims, that women who lived during times of ecclesiastical oppression were 'more open than men to visionary experiences in the first place, make more of them when they occurred, and use them as the basis for their authority as teachers of theology and spirituality'. This view is dismissive, and hermeneutically stifling.

That mystics and their testimonies can be understood as a reflection of their culture and institutions of power does not mean that their experiences are not valid or disclosing in ways other than the purely sociological. To argue that woman mystics are nothing other than reflections of social and political power struggles is to dismiss them and their work in a far more damaging way than the restrictions placed on women at the time by the church. It is our responsibility, perhaps particularly as

feminists, to evaluate their canon with a hermeneutics of empowerment: we ought not to be simply dismissing them as puppets of patriarchy, even if their writings were appropriated for such ends.

It is also important to realize that both Foucault, with his discussion of power and society (Foucault and Sheridan 1979), and Jantzen, in adopting them uncritically in her assessment of the purpose of the work of woman mystics, display gender bias. These power struggles have operated unequally for women and men; we must not forget that although it is possible to see the woman mystics endorsed by the church as reflections of a very particular social and political power dynamic, it is also essential that we do not fall into the trap of dismissing the content of their work simply because they are women.

Jantzen's dismissal of Hildegard's writings as the means to an end (the end being the consolidation of power) is another way of invalidating, disenfranchising, and ultimately silencing the voice of women. Mysticism and the definition therefore of 'mystic' has, like anything connected intrinsically with the distribution of power, maintained and been a product of gender and sexual difference, as Jantzen argues. But her critique of this implicit bias is also blindly swayed by personal bias. She does exactly the same thing.

Mysticism and Misogyny

We should not do what I accuse Jantzen of doing: and resist throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Much in Jantzen's critique of mysticism and specifically the study of mysticism is valid and enlightening. Examples of what Jantzen describes in her critique of the way mysticism has been addressed, are found in much of the work of male scholars of mysticism and religion.

An example of a theologian who uses the testimony of women mystics to further their own theological agenda, while silencing the women's own words, is found in the work of Denys Turner, and most specifically, his most recent book on Julian of Norwich. Despite also rejecting (if not explicitly) the binary of active and passive mysticism, in this book, Turner explicitly claims that 'Julian is no mystic' (Turner 2011: 26). Using the Jamesian understanding of mysticism which defines mystical experience as ineffable, he argues that her 'shewings' are instead 'distinctly communicable' and moreover, that the very purpose of their communication is to teach within the framework of the Church. It is this as well as Julian's personal fear of punishment for sin that Turner claims prevent her from being a mystic.

But rather than question the inadequate definition of a mystic, as I insist is necessary, Turner simply accepts James's definition and by doing so, dismisses the possibility that a woman mystic could also adequately describe and communicate her experiences. Turner's claim is that being a mystic and a theologian are mutually exclusive. Julian is a theologian precisely because her teachings, according to Turner – that sin removes us from true union with God and that it is through the

Church that we can find union with God again – correlate with the ‘teaching and preaching’ of the Church. His central argument is that Julian’s mystical experiences cannot, and more importantly, *should not* be removed from the common teaching of the Church. The implication here is that mystics are renegades and Julian is no renegade.

But it is not simply that theologians have a tendency to speak over the voices of already marginalised women, it is that they then appropriate the knowledge of those women for their own ends. Michelle le Dœuff writes about this theft of women’s knowledge, of the disenfranchisement of women from the history of philosophy and theology, and uses the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau appropriating the ideas of Gabrielle Suchon, and claiming them as his own (Le Dœuff 2003). In his most recent book, Turner is guilty of the same thing, although in a different and less effective form. The main argument Turner puts forward for reading Julian’s theology with as much respect as that given to Aquinas and Anselm (a claim he makes multiple times throughout the book), is based upon a single phrase of Julian’s; ‘Sinne is behovely’.

Turner translates the Middle English adjective behovely firstly into the Latin word *conveniens*, and then translates *conveniens* into ‘fitting’ or ‘it fits’. There is no scholarly evidence or justification for this. Behovely is the word used by Julian. It is not by any means translated as ‘fitting’; this is something that Turner does all by

himself, via translating it into another, different word, *conveniens*, in a different language (Latin), that Julian herself did not speak or read

By doing this he does two things: firstly, he re-writes a women mystic's story. He claims that Julian, a woman who according to her own testimony is 'a simple creature unletterede', not only read and understood Latin, but also had access to the writings of theologians from the high medieval schools. Turner's contention that Julian is as important a theologian as Anselm or Aquinas rests on her use of the word *conveniens*, a word, Turner acknowledges, she doesn't use herself and for which there is little evidence she would have come across. Turner 'protects [his] flank' by claiming a 'modesty due of a speculation' but his understanding of Julian's theology of sin as well as her soteriology are based upon his reading behovely as *conveniens* (Turner 2011: 37).

And the list of examples of this type of reading and working on the texts of women mystics goes on. It's not just that this is an example of bad scholarship from men working on the texts of mystics, but this specific example relates to my broader argument: that the individuals I identify as the actively abjected are most at risk from having their testimony appropriated and used. This leads them to be disenfranchised from the power of their own experiences and work. Steven Katz and J. M. Cohen offer themselves up as examples of a particular type of sexist and chauvinist writing that confines the definition of 'true' mystic and mysticism to those who are men, or endorsed by men. Katz offers perhaps the perfect example

of what Jantzen claims is the standard approach to validating mystics, and although Jantzen's project is to show how factors of power and gender impact directly who is validated as a mystic by institutions of religious power historically, these same critiques can be applied to those who study mysticism within the academy.

Injustice is perpetuated when we have men validating the work of men mystics as 'authentic' and of value, and focus scholarly work on the testimony of men mystics over women (despite the vast majority of mystics being women). More texts are written on the work of Meister Eckhaart, for example, than on all of the women mystics put together. University courses on mysticism focus on John of the Cross, Eckhaart, and Bernard of Clairvaux over and above the texts written by women who have claimed similar experiences. The focus on men mystics despite the majority of mystics of the Church not being men betrays this same sexist patriarchal dominance. Male mystics are considered 'men of genius' whereas as the above examples show, those not men are dismissed as hysterics, megalomaniacs, or mad women.

Within traditional scholarly work on mysticism, the testimonies of individuals unfortunate enough to not be men must be endorsed by a man before they are engaged with at all. For every famous woman mystic we read and know about, there is a collection of significantly more powerful men attached to her, supporting and endorsing her work. In most cases, such as that of Teresa of Avila and Hildegard of Bingen, these men literally presented the work of the women to the pope at the time,

with the assurance that it was of value. The male seal of approval was necessary for the texts to be taken seriously. Within the Catholic Church, nothing has changed. And it is not so different within academia and the scholarly work on these mystics of the Church.

The 'classic' translations of these women's writing are all written by men. Historically, the scholars of mysticism who had the power over the distribution, understanding and translation of the texts of these long-dead women were men. But not only men; these were sexist, patronising, and misogynistic men. J. M. Cohen, the translator of Saint Teresa of Avila's *Vita* demonstrates such unfortunate qualities in his introduction to the text. His misogyny is visible in his disdain. He writes about Teresa as if she were an irritating wife; 'In every chapter she harps on about her unworthiness' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 14). According to Cohen, her writing is of poor quality; she can barely understand what she is describing; her words are made up and funny-sounding:

Latin she could hardly understand; any Latin quotations that occur in the *Life* are spelt so phonetically as to be almost unrecognizable. Her vocabulary, therefore, is that of a plain person; all grand words are suspect to her. Even many religious terms are lumped together in her mind under the heading of 'mystical theology', a theoretical science of which she confessed herself to be ignorant of. Teresa's spelling of Latin follows its own phonetic rules, so does her writing of Spanish. Her punctuation was weak, even to the point of nonexistence, and this defect has been only imperfectly remedied by her editors. One is seldom in doubt as to what she is saying, but often puzzled by the syntax of her sentences, which abound in unrelated clauses. She does not appear to have re-read what she wrote. Several times in the course of the *Life* she remarks that she may have mentioned something before. It does not seem

to have occurred to her that she could have turned back to see.²⁷ She never verified her dates, and frequently lost the thread of her narrative when following a digression of consuming interest (1987: 12)

Cohen does not simply take issue with Teresa's literary style. His attack on her is personal and gendered. 'In it [the *Life*] we see how a self-willed and hysterically unbalanced woman, who seemed on the way to becoming a worldly nun of the conventional sort, was entirely transformed by profound experiences' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 13). Quite what Cohen means by 'a worldly nun of the conventional sort' is open to interpretation, but it seems fairly clear that his conception of worldliness coincides with the familiar dualism where 'worldly' things are associated with the body, sex, and women: the 'lower planes' of existence.

Moreover, he removes from Teresa any agency in her transformation or her experiences. Her passive life was 'entirely transformed by profound experiences'. He gives the agency entirely to the experiences. This is not only philosophically compromised as an approach, it permanently disenfranchises Teresa. He continues his character assassination, telling the reader what Teresa's motivations and reasons for writing were, as the male expert in these matters:

At first she seems to have viewed her vows as no more than an insurance against the complete loss of her soul. This she feared as, when younger, she

²⁷ This criticism is particularly galling because as Cohen should have known, the version of the *Life* that he translated was so heavily edited by her male advisors as to almost not be Teresa's own work. Any criticism of an editorial nature is unable to be legitimately levied at Teresa's feet. Of course the legitimacy of the criticism is demonstrably of secondary importance to his chauvinistic intention; that of asserting himself and his brilliance, as well as the brilliance of almost any other man, over her own.

had feared the loss of her reputation. But, for the rest, the impulse which had driven her as a girl to the religious life had almost completely died away. How she gained strength to combat her own waywardness, and gradually grew, almost unaided by her ignorant confessors, to understand and assess the spiritual experiences that befell her, is the central theme of her book. One sees her impelled by forces that she could not even pretend to control (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 13).

On Cohen's assessment, Teresa is 'a self-willed and hysterically unbalanced woman' who was solely changed by external events. She is a terrible writer, lacking skill and education, who does not understand what she writes about. 'Teresa is, therefore, the best of the mystical writers for those who do not accept or understand the relationship between God and man that is assumed by the mystics of all ages and countries' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 13). Cohen does not even credit Teresa with the success of her text which he admits is 'after Don Quixote, the most widely read prose classic of Spain' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 11). According to him, Teresa's lack of understanding meant that she wrote simple words for simple people and 'It is for this reason that her *Life* has worn so well.'

Cohen closes his introduction to one of the most significant, beautiful, and influential texts in the world with a final shot at its woman author; 'Her pupil, St John of the Cross, is a more brilliant and poetic writer, possibly also a person of profounder religious experience, but he has little to say to the beginner; he is always on the heights' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 14). Cohen's treatment of Teresa as an individual and Teresa's writings is a paradigmatic example of epistemic injustice. In his introduction he locates his own scholarship in a nexus of patriarchal, elitist,

sexism and it is impossible to read his translations of her work by him without this lens.²⁸

We can see a common theme developing in the writing of these gentlemen and scholars when we return to another well-respected scholar of mysticism, Stephen Katz. The way in which texts written by men are treated compared to those produced by women is notable. Katz's explicit chauvinism outstrips Cohen's when he argues for the study of mysticism to be taken seriously despite the amount of women associated with it, because there were also notable 'men of genius'.

In his text considered 'ground-breaking' and 'fundamentally important' (Sorrell 1988: 79) Katz argues that:

...though no philosophical argument is capable of proving the veracity of mystical experience, one would be dogmatic and imprudent to decide a priori that mystical claims are mumbo-jumbo, especially given the wide variety of such claims by men of genius and/or intense religious sensitivity over the centuries as well as across all cultural divisions' (Katz 1978: 23).

Katz is defending the continued engagement with mystical testimony by scholars despite the huge collection of testimony offered by less valued epistemic agents (agents who are women), because there are many 'men of genius' who claim the same, and their testimony ought to be engaged with.

²⁸ This is perhaps a perfect example of the gendering of genius, described by Christine Battersby. See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius : Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women's Press, 1989).

It is ironic that Katz' project, one whose 'primary aim has been to mark out a new way of approaching the data, concentrating on disabusing scholars of the preconceived notion that all mystical experience is the same of similar' (Katz 1978: 65) is so blind to its own gendered locatedness, a gendered locatedness that assumes that because testimony is from 'men of genius' it must be valid.

One cannot respond Katz's use of explicitly gendered language is accidental. When he says 'men of genius' he literally means men – not women, or people. We cannot claim him as an authority and expert scholar on the one hand, and dismiss his use of gendered language on the other. Either he knows what he is writing or he does not. As it stands, his prejudice towards those mystics he considered 'men of genius' is betrayed in the amount of writing he devotes to studying them, over any 'women of genius' that may be considered a 'mystic'.

Katz, while keen to distinguish between the verification of mystical experience and the interpretation of mystical experience, concluding that there is no 'pure' mystical experience and instead all mystical experience is in some way culturally and linguistically located, fails to see how his own language locates his own interpretation within a nexus of gender and power. It is not simply that the language he uses to justify engagement with mystical testimony is a 'product of his time' it is carefully chosen and meaningful. When Katz argues that certain testimony ought not be rejected as 'mumbo-jumbo, especially given the wide variety of such claims by men of genius' he is specifically separating the testimony of men out from that

which is usually considered ‘mumbo-jumbo’. If the opposite of male-genius testimony is mumbo-jumbo, mumbo-jumbo here is gendered female or, not-male. This way of engaging with these texts cannot continue.

A New Way: The Actively Abjected

If these ways of engaging with mysticism should be abandoned, what is a good way of engaging? It is not that we need a new definition of mysticism, but rather, that we need to recognise how some individuals who have been broadly understood to fit this problematic standard model of mysticism, do not fit that model. People who do not fit into the standard model, I label the actively abjected. Rather than a refined model of ‘the mystic’, I argue that certain individuals occupy the least corrupted parts of the models discussed above, and combine them to become a particular type of individual who creates change within religious institutions. Rather than define what mystical experience ‘is’ or define who counts as a mystic, my approach starts from a different point. I shall ask ‘what effects change?’ and ‘what characteristics are held by those who effect change?’

But I am not interested in the question of who effects change in the world, broadly speaking. I am specifically concerned with who effects change within religious institutions, because it is within these institutions that the oppression of the most marginalized people occurs. I am looking for a definition not of ‘the mystic’, but of those who apparently occupy some of the space of ‘mystic’ and effect change from

there. Thus, my refined question is: What are the characteristics possessed by those people who effect liberating change within theological or religious institutions?²⁹

The answer to this question leaves two types of people: those who already have institutionally given power, and those who do not. Those who fall into the first category are most often excluded from my refined definition. By virtue of their appointed power, they will not be likely (at least intentionally) to take action that threatens the stability of this power. There are exceptions to this rule which will be explored in Chapter Five. But by and large, my search for the answer to the question of who will effect liberating change within theological or religion institutions leads me to those whose power is not bestowed upon them by traditional, legally framed, sources. Following Weber, those not contained in the first two categories seem to fit the third: Charismatic.

Although Weber's definitions appear to be directly relevant to my argument, they have limited efficacy. Weber is only concerned with a particular form of power – however it manifests – namely, ruling power. The power possessed by the actively abjected is not that of the ruler. Even if we could argue that the actively abjected, through their claims of dialogue with the divine, exhibit charismatic authority according to Weber's taxonomy, it is not truly authority as Weber understands it because many of the actively abjected do not weald temporal power. In other words,

²⁹ Weber's Rational-Legal authority intersecting with Traditional Authority see Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology* (Owen, 1962).

the fact of their abjection discounts any actively abjected from holding true charismatic power, as defined by Weber.

Three distinct characteristics emerge when we consider the question of who will effect liberating change from within religious institutions. People who effect change within theological and religious institutions locate the source of their power from outside the institutions themselves. Those who claim to have dialogue with the divine fulfil this category. They also have a very specific type of power; as Jantzen correctly claims, 'In a society where authority was seen largely as a male preserve, women had internalized the low self-esteem in which they were held, exacerbated by their lack of formal education and ecclesiastical position. Any authority had to have some form of special validation' (Jantzen 1995: 169). For women mystics this special validation was God Himself. But the gender of the individual is not important at this stage – the important element here is that the source of authority is over and above the authority of any institution, and that this authority comes from having a 'mystical experience'.

The second characteristic held by those people who effect liberating change within theological or religious institutions is that they take some form of political action. I define political action here as any action that is taken with the intention of engaging with structures of power. Those who effect liberating change engage with the structures of power they understand to be causing oppression.

My model of the actively abjected can include those who claim to have had mystical experience which endows them with a form of charismatic authority. They then use that authority to engage with oppressive power structures. This engagement can take many different forms. The examples I will give in the following chapters involve direct action (such as preventing the exhumation of a dead body) through to writing letters that directly undermine theological norms regarding the gendered language of God.

The final characteristic: that of being abjected follows from these first two characteristics held by those who effect liberating change within theological or religious institutions is. The abject is Kristeva's notion that describes things which define other objects through them being made 'the other'. The abject is in extreme opposition to what it is that we are or, more accurately, desire to be. For Kristeva, the abject is a form of desire turned in on itself. In this case, the institution of power that the individual is engaging with, with the intention of changing, becomes the subject who abjects. This means it projects onto the individual all those things they do not desire to be.

A key characteristic of the abject is that of liminality. The abject are those things that lie on the borders of experience that rupture the clearly defined boundaries between who we are and who we are not. The abject is always liminal. The abject 'Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les

places, les règles.’ [‘It is what does not respect borders, positions, rules’]. It is ‘L’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte.’ [‘The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’] (Kristeva 1980: 12 trans. mine).

Examples of the abject include dead bodies, something not alive, something that is not a being, and yet still exists as a physical presence, and faeces - something that is not a part of one and yet is of one. Those things that inhabit the space between certainties: they are liminal entities that are neither subject nor object. The things that inhabit this uncategorizable space are so repellent because they point to sites of ambiguity; they show up spaces where meaning has no sure footing. ‘In short, the abject is everything that threatens the collapse of order by threatening the collapse of meaning and the annihilation of the self.’ (Goodnow 2010: 30).

In the following chapters I will show how each of these three characteristics combine to produce a particular type of individual: the actively abjected, and how this particular type of individual holds a specific epistemic position within theology.

Chapter Two: Necessary but not Sufficient Categories

(1) One Who Dialogues with the Divine

Believing oneself to have had a mystical experience has always been considered one of the most important elements of being a mystic. All mystics - however they are defined - have this one thing in common. As we saw in Chapter One, the term 'mystical experience' is variously understood and defined. I am not offering a new definition of 'mystical experience', and nor is the term in its current broad understanding a good characterization of the particular type of engagement the individuals I describe have with the divine. Mystical experience is an overly broad term, open to many interpretations.

'Communication with the divine' may be a better way of defining the category of 'mystic' because it is not simply an amorphous 'experience'; mystics that have effect in the world describe a back-and-forth communication. But communication need not imply action: one can be communicated *at*. Those who fit the model of the actively abjected were not just present to an experience; they engaged with it and were the recipients of return engagement.

When one participates in communication and that participation is returned, one is in dialogue with another. It is also the case that this communication—or, as I shall go on to argue, specifically *dialogue*—gets mystics into trouble. It is generally

accepted that ‘the conflict between institutional religion and mystical piety is inevitable, insofar as mysticism is based on claims to a direct, personal relation to God independent of ecclesiastical structures and mediation’ (McGinn 2004: 14). The first of the three characteristics of the actively abjected, then, is that the individual understands herself to have a dialogue with the divine. Here I will employ close textual readings of the writings of a collection of individuals in order to show how their testimony is distinctly dialogical.

Dialogue is participatory. It is a conversation between two subjects; it cannot be passive. Therefore, those who claim to have a dialogue with the divine challenge the Jamesian model of mysticism. The texts of the women currently understood as mystics directly challenge the very model of mysticism used to categorize them. These texts show active dialogue rather than passive reception of information as a core component of what may be termed ‘mystical experience’. When we talk about dialogue, we accept that there are two parties; dialogue is not something one ‘does’ to another, and nor is it something that is done ‘to’ oneself. Therefore, implicit in any understanding of dialogue with the divine is the participation of at least two subjects—even if this understanding is only held by the individual herself. It is not necessary to prove (and of course it would be impossible) that these individuals’ dialogue partner, God, ‘exists’ – it is enough that the individual understands herself to be engaged in a dialogue with the divine.

An important point to make here is that when we talk of two subjects, we are assuming a certain concept of selfhood or subjectivity.³⁰ Ben Morgan, in *On Becoming God*, claims that a fundamental flaw in the project of postmodernist and much feminist theory is that the ‘the paradoxical positions they adopt are necessary only because of the particular, questionable, and historically locatable model of identity to which they remain committed’ (Morgan 2013: 24). This model of identity is flawed, according to Morgan, because it is based upon patriarchal concepts such as autonomy and self-containment. If, as I claim above, believing oneself to have had a mystical experience has always been considered one of the most important elements of being a mystic, it is important that we consider what sort of selfhood must be assumed for our conception of mystical experience.

As I use the term, dialogue presupposes two agents: one who engages with another as interlocutor. But for there to be an-other, there must be a conception of the self being distinct from the other. This conception of dialogue is not particularly contentious.³¹ Taking this definition of dialogue, it is possible to apply Morgan's critique to my own model of dialogue: if, as I have defined it, dialogue is a subject-

³⁰ For a comprehensive discussion of the distinction between these two, see Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2005).

³¹ For a comprehensive history of the use of dialogue and specifically its meaning as I propose it, see Katarzyna Jazdzewska, 2013, 'From *Dialogos* to Dialogue: The Use of the Term from Plato to the Second Century CE', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 54 No. 1 17-36

to-subject interaction, what do we mean by 'subject'?³² Can we usefully—or, perhaps more importantly, *accurately*—speak of ‘the subject’ when speaking of texts written by those who may not have held our same conception of subjectivity?³³

The criticisms Morgan presents are important particularly when attempting to address issues of gender and identity in the texts of early-medieval German writers. But settling on an accurate conception of identity is less fundamental to my project. Yes, my definition of ‘dialogue’ is based on a concept of selfhood, but it need not be an autonomous, self-contained selfhood.³⁴ For my conception of dialogue to stand up, I need the mystic to be aware of a distinction between herself and the divine at the time of the locutions or communications. That she does experience her engagement with the divine as one that bridges a gap between her ‘self’ and His ‘self’ (or Herself in the case of Haadewijch who most often used feminine gendered language to describe God), is proof that she recognizes there to be a gap to be bridged.

³² Ben Morgan and I discussed this issue at the conference *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, in Liverpool, July 2014. I am grateful to Ben for his time and comments.

³³ If we recall my claim in the introduction that the historical locatedness of the texts is of secondary importance to their content (for my project), then we can see here how the idea of subjectivity of the authors of the texts is of less importance to the contemporary concepts of subjectivity held by those of use reading them today.

³⁴ The question may then arise that if my conception of selfhood does not require autonomy, can this same ‘self’ take action? Does action require autonomy? I would argue (and expand on this argument in Chapter Three) that action as I understand it requires autonomy only to the extent to which autonomy is understood by the agent. So if Hildegard, writing in the tenth century, understood ‘herself’ to be able to act one way or another, and chose one way over another, she is exercising autonomy and taking action.

One might object that mystics writing in the twelfth, thirteenth, or fourteenth centuries did not have the same concept of subjectivity or identity that we have. However, they did have a concept of agency and, indeed, of submission. These are agents who exercise their wills as they understand themselves to be capable of doing. Their testimony has a great deal to say about submission. It must also be noted that the concepts people use do not shape their ability to be affected by what other concepts denote. Medieval individuals lacked what we would understand as the concept of gravity, but were subject to it all the same. Although the twelfth-century understanding of how and why items dropped from a height and returned to the ground was different to how we conceive of gravity, it nevertheless offered a working understanding of the event. We may not share a twelfth-century concept of agency and submission, but as people who have taken action and performed acts, both we and a twelfth-century nun have a ‘working understanding’ of agency.

Morgan’s other point is about the continued use of poststructuralist models of subjectivity that are based upon problematic patriarchal criteria such as individualism, self-containment, and sovereignty. But the very fact that these models of subjectivity are so fundamental to patriarchy and contemporary structuralist and poststructuralist conceptions of the self and identity means that they are the best tools to use to dismantle the same conceptions. Within both mystical theology and lay-theology, some conservative Christian writers are using the testimonies of women such as Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, and

Hildegard of Bingen to shore up a flawed and oppressive model of Christian femininity. This is worrying for many reasons, and any reading of women mystics needs to address this. My thesis is in part an attempt to do so. Ultimately, if the only way in which people can understand and relate to women mystics and their suffering is through the lens of their own concept and practice of selfhood, we ought at least to present an alternative way of understanding their lives, the actions they took, and what it achieved that is not in tension with the (postmodern) concept of selfhood.

Mental Health Issues

I have refined the category of the actively abjected only to include those people who understand themselves to be dialoguing with the divine. But even this restricted category shelters many different testimonies. Many of the individuals to whom this label could easily apply could also be diagnosed as suffering from a specific mental illness. Almost any psychiatric hospital in the world contains at least one patient who claims to be dialoguing with the divine or, indeed, claims to be the divine and to be in dialogue with themselves. Can these people fit my category? Yes. Absolutely.

Each of the three categories of the model for the actively abjected are wide. It is in their intersection that the refinement occurs. To dismiss individuals who suffer from mental illness as unqualified candidates would throw up huge epistemological

issues. Because it is impossible to prove the existence of the divine, it is impossible to prove that individuals are not communicating with the divine. Unless we clearly define the divine, and then measure communication with such a divine, we are unable to prove the inverse. In any case, this is irrelevant to my investigation.³⁵

It might be argued that although it is impossible clearly to define the divine, we are able to define and measure mental illness. Those who claim to be dialoguing with the divine may well tick every box of a specific diagnosis, the manifestations of which include hallucinations, neurosis, and the hearing of voices. Perhaps if we can prove that an individual claiming to be in conversation with the divine is mentally ill, we have by default proven they are not a mystic. But this does not follow. Why can a mentally ill person not also be a mystic?

There has always been a strong relationship between mental health and religion. Not only has mental illness often looked similar to what has been described as ‘mystical experience’; until the nineteenth century, religious institutions were also responsible for the care of mentally ill patients. It was only with the development of psychiatric medicine and specifically the work of Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud, who linked religious experiences with ‘hysteria’ and neurosis, that a divide occurred between religion and the care of the mentally ill (Argyle 2000).

³⁵ The obvious objection is that surely we can know that someone is not talking to the divine if they are talking to us. But, strictly speaking, unless we are able to prove that we are not the divine, or indeed that the individual claiming to be in dialogue with the divine is not *also* in dialogue with the divine as well as us, we cannot claim that they are not.

As psychiatry developed, this divide widened. Some psychiatrists and psychotherapists began to suggest that religion was in fact a negative influence on vulnerable people, and may even cause mental illness (Ellis 1980). Inevitably, some psychiatrists suggested that all and every 'mystical experience' was in fact a manifestation of mental illness (Davidson and Davidson 1980). More recent research on the link between religious practice and mental health has suggested that religious practice has a generally positive impact on mental health and on the ability to deal with difficult and traumatic life experiences. But there is still much debate and discussion as to how to distinguish between psychoses and religious or mystical experience, and this difficulty in distinguishing between the two likely will never be resolved.³⁶

Today, those who claim to be having religious or mystical experiences involving conversation with the divine are assessed by psychiatrists. Even when it is possible to diagnose an individual as suffering from a mental illness, any decision as to whether they are also communicating with the divine is made on purely subjective bases.³⁷ Until the early nineteenth century, those who claimed to be in dialogue with

³⁶ For a discussion of, and extensive bibliography on, the ways in which psychiatry distinguishes between psychoses and mystical experience, see Edgar Harnack, 'The Diagnostic Separation of Psychosis And spiritual Experience Ii: Distinctive Criteria for Clinical Practice', *Journal for Spirituality and Transcendental Psychology*, 2/1 (2012).

³⁷ It should be noted that a mental health diagnosis is also judged on a purely subjective basis inasmuch as psychiatry is a social construct as much as any other discourse.

the divine were only assessed by priests—to discern whether their dialogues were divine or diabolical.

Once psychiatry as a medicine was widely practiced, if an individual claiming to have dialogue with the divine also displayed symptoms of specific mental illness such as schizophrenia (a diagnosable disorder that is itself made up of a collection of other, different diagnosable disorders) then they were judged to be mentally ill. If the individual displayed no other symptoms of specific mental illness (other than understanding themselves to be talking to God), and *also* had a background history and narrative that supported the teaching of the Church, then they were not labelled mentally ill, and were instead considered as prophets. In this sense, assessments of individuals claiming to be in dialogue with the divine remain as unscientific as they did before the nineteenth century - the only distinction now is that the new category of 'mental illness' is offered in place of the devil as an explanation for those experiences the Church did not wish to validate as coming from God (Tasca et al. 2012).

Being able to distinguish between mental illness and mystical experience is not straightforward. But it does not need to be. Because the intention is to find the actively abjected - the individual who has the capacity to effect liberating change to oppressive religious power structures - we do not need to know if mystics are 'really' talking to God. Our interest lies in the change they can effect while believing this change to be inspired by the divine. It is only important that they

understand themselves to be in dialogue with the divine, as this is the source of their desire to effect change.

Indeed, it is highly likely that an individual who wished to effect change to oppressive religious power structures on the basis of divine authority would be dismissed as mad. The label of ‘mad’ or ‘crazy’ has been used with great effect to silence, lock up, and repress people who have sought social and political change, since before the time of psychiatry.³⁸ If a ‘mad’ woman takes action against an oppressive institution while believing herself to be in dialogue with the divine, she fits the category of the actively abjected. Being labelled as ‘mad’ is one way in which an individual is abjected.³⁹

The similarity of manifestation of both mysticism and madness has long been recognized, and many texts on the former make reference to this in their prologues. ‘It is well to warn the reader than much of the language used will appear hardly intelligible, and may even give rise to doubts as to the mental balance of some of the writers’ (C. Butler 1926). And the distinction between madness or ‘mental unbalance’ and mystical experience is offered on almost all occasions: ‘It has to be asserted that the great mystics were not religiously mad; nor were they pious

³⁸ In *The Mystic Fable*, Michel de Certeau tells the story of ‘The Idiot Woman’ from the fourth century, where all of these issues of discerning ‘madness’ from holiness are apparent. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 32.

³⁹ I will develop this point further in the next chapter on abjection, but it is important to note at this point.

dreamers: far from it –they were, most of them, peculiarly sane and strong men and women, who left their mark, many of them, for good in history’ (C. Butler 1926).⁴⁰

It is important to note the association between madness and mysticism for two reasons. First, being ‘mad’ or ‘insane’ is perhaps one of the most common and reliable ways in which the testimony of women has been historically discredited. Second, my second criterion for an individual becoming actively abjected is that the individual believes herself to have a dialogue with the divine. A large amount of those who claim dialogue with the divine either have been called mad or are technically mentally ill. But this does not weaken the category nor discredit the potential power of the actively abjected individual. It is important to recognize that attempts to discredit the testimonies of mystics by dismissing them as mad do nothing other than place them in the category. We will now look to the texts of these ‘strong’ women for evidence that they understood themselves as being part of a dialogue.

⁴⁰ For an interesting discussion of the link between psychosis (specifically schizophrenia) and mystical experience, see Peter Buckley, 'Mystical Experience and Schizophrenia', *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 7/3 (1981), 516-21.

Dialogues with the Divine

In 1370, Catherine of Sienna, a third order Dominican,⁴¹ dictated the dialogues she had with God.⁴² Catherine had been having these conversations with God since she was a young child. Her spiritual advisor and confidante, Raymond of Capua, wrote his *Legenda Major*, translated into *Life of Catherine*, to document her various interactions with the divine. Although it is heavily hagiographic, it is the most helpful text we have to piece together Catherine's life before she started to document events herself (Raymond 1980). The dialogue Catherine claims to have with the divine is a lifelong one, and the collected dictated texts are called *The Dialogues* (Siena 2009).

Most of *The Dialogues* consist of answers to questions Catherine asks God. She calls the divine 'the Eternal Truth', 'the First Truth' and 'the Sweet Truth' variously, and the text follows the form of a reported conversation between Catherine and God. She writes, or rather dictates, in the third person. This dictation of course offers its own collection of problems. Dictation relies upon a

⁴¹ The Third Order of the Dominicans are lay Dominicans: 'unlike 'Conventional' religious living in communities, its members live in the world, with jobs and homes, husbands or wives, and children, while at the same time following a Rule, with a lifelong commitment to the Order and to the spirit and charism of St Dominic.' Lay of England and Scotland Dominicans, 'Www.Laydominicans.Org.Uk/About-Us', accessed 27/06/14.

⁴² From here on, for the sake of simplicity, I will not challenge the 'authenticity' of the testimony of individuals claiming to be conversing with God. It is not of interest to this thesis whether or not their discourse is 'truly' with the divine. Instead of writing 'dictated the dialogues she claimed to have had with God' I shall simply write 'dictated the dialogues she had with God'.

communication of meaning from the person speaking to the person taking down the dictation. Like all forms of translation, it relies upon the person taking down the dictation to accurately and honestly write what was been said. If one party cannot read or write a language, they are completely reliant on the accuracy of the party that can. There is no way for Catherine to check that the man taking down the dictation is doing so accurately; that he is not substituting certain words for others that he thinks are more appropriate, or even directly and actively changing the meaning of what she wants to write.

It would be difficult to make the argument that the person transcribing Catherine's dictation intentionally or significantly amended the meaning of her text. But it is important to note that even the change of a single word can have huge impact on the meaning ascribed to the text as a whole. When we engage with texts produced through dictation, just as with texts translated, we must be acutely aware of the extra layer that exists between the original author of the work and us as scholars studying it. The fact that *The Dialogues* were dictated allows us to explore again the questions of subjectivity that we visited above. If, as Morgan claims, we are guilty of imposing postmodern concepts of individual subjectivity bound up with patriarchal constructs of identity, then how can we fruitfully and most accurately relate to this text?

It seems likely that Catherine would not have had the same concern for 'authenticity' or 'accuracy' regarding the dictation of her words as I have

demonstrated here. It is likely that her understanding of subjectivity and her role as an agent creating a text was not in any way similar to the conception I hold as the author of this text, for example. It is likely that Catherine would have understood herself as playing only a part in multifaceted operation, guided by Divine Will, to create the finished product. The man to whom she dictated may have been to Catherine, for all we know, as important a figure in the creation of this text as she understood herself to be. We know from the writings and annotations of Teresa of Avila that she considered the input, engagement and ‘correction’ of her male advisors as essential and necessary to the creation of the finished work, however ‘imperfect’ she ultimately claimed it to be. We must recognize, as Morgan argues, that what I may understand as Teresa’s male spiritual advisors' interference and censoring was very likely understood by Teresa as their corrections, improvements and assistance.

Catherine refers to herself as ‘the soul’ or ‘that soul’ and each section of the text starts with a heading and a section explaining the context of the dialogue:

How finite works are not sufficient for punishment or recompense without the perpetual affection of love.

Then, the Eternal Truth seized and drew more strongly to Himself, her desire, doing as He did in the Old Testament; for when the sacrifice that was acceptable to Him; so the sweet truth to that soul, in sending down the fire of the clemency of the Holy Spirit, seizing the sacrifice that she made of herself saying: “Do you not know, dear daughter, that all the sufferings which the soul endures, or can endure, in this life, are insufficient to punish one smallest fault, because the offense, being done to Me, who am the Infinite Good, calls for an infinite satisfaction?” (Siena 2009)

In this dialogue Catherine, who was both an ascetic and stigmatic (although at her request her stigmata were only visible to herself), has the purpose of her sufferings and of those of others who also desire to ‘suffer with Christ’ explained. Throughout, *The Treatise on Divine Providence*, within which this dialogue is contained, demonstrates an intellectual engagement with the divine. It is not a simple message dictated by Jesus to a woman desperately desiring to be close to him, but is instead a thorough theological, ethical, and philosophical discussion that engages with issues of the nature of desire, closeness, suffering, and punishment.

In these dialogues we see a developed theology of atonement typical of the fourteenth century. Catherine is ‘known to us as an ascetic of heroic proportion’ (Starr Costello 1988) and her dialogues with the divine lay out a complex system of atonement. She expresses confusion, asks questions, and is given answers.⁴³ Perhaps the most important element that marks these testimonies out from passive experiences or events is that these dialogues evidence an engagement not just by Catherine with God, but importantly, by God with Catherine. Catherine is not simply the empty vessel awaiting divine filling: she is engaged in a dialectic relationship. God listens to her. He is *responsive*. This responsiveness is what distinguishes Catherine’s testimony and that of individuals like her from other

⁴³ Melanie Starr Costello’s article offers one of the most interesting explorations of Catherine’s *Dialogues* in relation to eschatology and atonement theology, showing how the popular idea of sanctification through suffering hides a collection of problematic theological assumptions. Melanie Starr Costello, ‘Catherine of Siena and the Eschatology of Suffering’, *Vox Benedicta: A Journal of Translations from Monastic Sources*, 5/1 (1988), 44-57.

passive mystical experience. She asks questions. Her questions are answered. This back-and-forth between Catherine and the divine makes her an active subject in the event.

Of course, there are different qualities of dialogue. All exchanges between two interlocutors may make both parties active subjects, but not all dialogues are equally rich. There is a qualitative difference between a young child's questioning of an adult and the questioning and response between two adults. One of the reasons for this is the way in which the young child responds to the answer she is given by her dialogue partner. When a three year old asks 'why?' and is met with an explanation, her response is another 'why?'⁴⁴ This differs from the response to an explanation given to an interlocutor of more equal noetic and epistemic standing. When I ask a fellow academic 'Why did Catherine dictate her text?' and am met with a response that contains information, my follow-up question is likely to be one that aims to understand the information already offered. The more equally matched a pair of dialogue partners are in terms of their capacity to understand, the richer the dialogue will be. According to this analogy, we can see Catherine's dialogue with God as the questionings of a child, but to those of us with a similar epistemic and noetic capacity as Catherine's, it won't seem as such. To other three-year-olds, our toddler's questioning of 'why?' as a follow-up to a response is not unreasonable. To the three-year-old, the dialogue will be understood as rich.

⁴⁴ It might be argued that most philosophy since Socrates follows this basic form.

How we question and how we understand the answers to our questions is dependent on a collection of different factors. Tone, intention, voice, the location of authority within any relationship and the different ways gender and power are manifested, presented and cemented in dialogue, make a dialogue more or less rich. A dialogue that we recognize as rich, such as the one reported by Catherine, will display all of these elements. Dialogue is distinct from passive reception of information, even if there is a distinct difference between the epistemic and noetic capabilities of the two dialogical partners.

According to Talbot Brewer, dialectical activities have:

...a self-unveiling character, in the sense that each successive engagement yields a further stretch of understanding of the goods internal to the activity, hence of what would count as a proper engagement in it. If the activity's constitutive goods are complex and elusive enough, this dialectical process can be reiterated indefinitely, with each successive engagement yielding a clearer grasp of the activity's proper form and preparing the way for a still more adequate and hence more revealing engagement in it.' (Brewer 2009)

This is an apt characterization of the rich possibilities contained within dialogue, as opposed to communication, the former can unfold in a potentially indefinite way as a result of one's confrontation of another.

Catherine writes that the divine wishes to 'satisfy the desire of that soul' (Siena 2009) to be shown visions that would do a better job of explaining something that the divine has stated. Often in the text, she asks for further visions or more information. The engagement between Catherine and the divine is nothing if not

‘yielding a further stretch of understanding’. The engagement is particular – He is dialoguing with her specifically, not with all of humankind – and it occurs particularly in that moment, about a particular thing. Catherine asks to have certain points clarified and explained to her in more detail: ‘I perceive two other points, concerning which I fear that they are, or may become, stumbling-blocks to me. I beg, Eternal Father, that, before I leave the subject of these states of tears, You would explain these points also to me’ (Siena 2009).

She goes on to ask specific questions and implores the divine to give further detail. His response is individual and specific:

Then the Eternal God, delighting in the thirst and hunger of that soul, and in the purity of her heart, and the desire with which she longed to serve Him, turned the eye of His benignity and mercy upon her, saying -- "Oh, best-beloved, dearest and sweetest daughter, my spouse! Rise out of yourself, and open the eye of your intellect to see Me, the Infinite Goodness, and the ineffable love which I have towards you and My other servants. And open the ear of the desire which you feel towards Me, and remember, that if you do not see, you can not hear, that is to say, that the soul that does not see into My Truth with the eye of her intellect, cannot hear or know My Truth, wherefore in order that you may the better know it, rise above the feelings of your senses. (Siena 2009)

Julian of Norwich

Another example of active participation in dialogue with the divine can be found in the writings of Julian of Norwich. Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love*, another

fourteenth-century text, was written after a period of intense sickness during which she received a collection of visions. Apparently recording the conversations she had with God during these visions, the *Revelations*, like Catherine's *Dialogues*, show a complex engagement between two interlocutors that results in a developed theology.⁴⁵ Julian is not simply the passive recipient of knowledge or visions – like Catherine, she asks questions and is given answers. These answers come in the form of visions and a 'knowing' – she calls them her 'shewings' – as well as verbal replies delivered to her directly.

It was at this time that our Lord showed me spiritually how intimately he loves us. [...] And he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'what is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, 'It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it,' In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God' (Julian 1966).

Both Catherine and Julian are involved in a dialogue. But one could object that the dialogues individuals such as Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich engage in

⁴⁵ In his book on Julian, Denys Turner claims that Julian was in fact as important a theologian as Aquinas and Augustine. But, controversially, he also claims that 'Julian is no mystic'. These things do not seem to me to be mutually exclusive. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2011) at 27. See also Catherine Tomas, 'Book Review: Denys Turner, Julian of Norwich, Theologian', *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 21/1 (2012), 136-37.

are actually forms of self-analysis: rather than dialoguing with the divine, they are actually dialoguing with themselves. Classical psychoanalytic theory, for example, described the potential for an individual to fruitfully engage in the process of self-analysis (Horney 1970).

There are two responses to this objection. The first is that the textual evidence indicates this not to be the case. The second is that the mystics do not understand themselves to be in self-analysis. Teresa of Avila, as we shall see, explicitly engages with the idea, before explaining in detail how she knows that her locutions are not a product of the intellect or understanding. Similarly, Catherine of Siena's dialogues, like those of Julian of Norwich, Vassula Ryden, and Teresa of Avila, are distinct from the writings of someone in a dialogical relationship with herself. In self-analysis, the analysand understands herself to be in dialogue with herself. She may be surprised by the responses she uncovers through the process, but at no point is she under the illusion that she is engaging with anyone or anything other than herself. In the course of mystical dialogues, the direction of the mystic's questioning changes. The engagement of the mystic was heeded by her interlocutor - the discourse is responsive and organic.

Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila makes it a point in her *Life* to 'explain also how these locutions that come from good spirits differ from those that come from the evil ones, and how

they may be – as sometimes occurs – caused by the intellect itself’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987). She goes on to explain how the locutions she receives from God are distinct from those from any other source, including the intellect. Teresa concedes that it may be possible to fool oneself into believing one is talking to God, but she knows this is not the case with her locutions:

I think it is possible that a person who has laid some request before God with most loving concern may imagine a voice telling him whether his prayer will be granted or not. This may well be, though once he had heard some genuine message he will see clearly what this voice is for there is a great difference between the two experiences. If his answer has been invented by the understanding, however subtle it may be contrived, he perceives the intellect ordering the words and speaking them. It is just as if a person was composing a speech, or listening to what someone else says and the understanding will then realize that it is not listening but working, and the words it is inventing are imprecise and fanciful; they have not the clarity of the real locution. (Teresa and Cohen 1987)

It is explicit from the texts that mystics believe themselves to be conversing with the divine and not just engaged in a dialogue with themselves. Catherine’s dialogues with the divine have the tone and character of an individual in conversation with their lover. As the dialogues progress, there is a deepening of the relationship:

This is the state of two dear friends, for though they are two in body, yet they are one in soul through the affection of love, because love transforms the lover into the object loved, and where two friends have one soul, there can be no secret between them, wherefore My Truth said: *'I will come and we will dwell together,'* and this is the truth." (Siena 2009)

This is not the writing of someone engaged in self-analysis. It is abundantly clear from the text that, as far as Catherine is concerned, she is in dialogue with a

responsive, and very much ‘other’, partner. As she says, ‘I think it would be a marvel if any experienced person were taken in, unless he deliberately wanted to be’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987).

Hildegard von Bingen

Hildegard von Bingen offers a different type of dialogue with the divine. The majority of the testimony we have from Hildegard is in the form of her correspondences with those in ecclesiastical authority.⁴⁶ In her letters, all in Latin, Hildegard reports what ‘The Living Light’ [“lux vivens”] has told her; what He says in response to her and her correspondents’? requests for information; and His responses to their actions. More often than not, Hildegard reports that ‘the Living Light’ – the most common term she uses to refer to the divine – is disappointed, angry and even disgusted by the behavior of the men she writes to: ‘Ach! You piece of dust, why are you not ashamed at exalting yourself to the heights when you ought to be in the muck?’ (Hildegard et al. 1998).

Her letters are often shocking in their force and fall into one of two categories: they are either humble, even groveling, or else filled with fury, indignant rage, and

⁴⁶ Although she claimed to receive visions and messages from God from a very early age, Hildegard ‘reports that for a long time she tried to hide her supernatural experiences as best she could because she was haunted by feelings of fear and embarrassment.’ Tsakirpoulou-Summers in Laurie Churchill, Phyllis Brown, and Jane Jeffrey, *Women Writing Latin: Medieval Modern Women Writing Latin* (2002) 448 at 133. It was only at the age of 43 that she began to write about her visions.

authority. This difference in tone between letters written as herself and those where she is repeating the messages she receives from the divine, emphasizes her role in the dialogue she holds with God. According to the letters she writes to Church authorities, she understands herself to be a weak and pitiful woman worthy of nothing, while the Living Light has authority over all.

In a letter to Pope Eugenius (Pope 1145-1153), a man who was to become one of her most important supporters, Hildegard asks for his blessings on her writings. This letter is one of the most important letters we have of Hildegard's, as it was in response to this that she secured her first papal defender. In this letter she explains how, 'poor little woman though I am, I have written these things to you which God saw fit to teach me in a true vision, by mystic inspiration' (Hildegard et al. 1998).⁴⁷ Hildegard makes a point of emphasizing her gender when engaging with men in powers of authority within the Church whose support she needs. In a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, she describes herself as:

Ego, misera et plus quam misera in nomine femineo, ab infantia mea vidi magna mirabilia, que lingua mea non potest proferre, nisi quod me docuit Spiritus Dei, ut credam. (Hildegard et al. 1991)

⁴⁷ The word 'mystic' is translated by Baird from the original 'mysticum' – which is interesting because, according to de Certeau, in the twelfth century the word did not hold its contemporary meaning. Instead, it alluded to something linked to the mystery of Christ. When Hildegard uses the word 'mysticum' in her texts, it is a way of showing that they come from God. Hildegard, L. Van Acker, and M. Klaes-Hachmöller, *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium* (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis; Turnholti: Brepols, 1991) v.

[I am wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition, I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express but which the great Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe.] (Trans. mine)

This letter shows us a collection of things: first, that there are two distinct voices used by Hildegard. This voice used to write to Bernard is quite distinct from the letter quoted above, to Pope Eugenius. Second, Hildegard obviously distinguishes herself (or her intellect or understanding, as Teresa might call it) from the source of her messages. Third, that she considers herself to have been in a dialectical relationship with the divine since ‘earliest childhood’, and fourth, that this engagement with the divine has changed her ‘that [she] may believe’. These are all things that distinguish dialogue from passive reception.

It is important to point out Hildegard's use of *proferre* (and not *decere*). When Hildegard writes *que lingua mea non potest proferre* – which my tongue cannot express – she is making a distinction between expression (*proferre*) and physical ability to say (*dicere*). Her word choice makes the important point that she understands something, but cannot adequately communicate it. If she were dialoguing with herself, expression and understanding would be one. Teresa describes the difference between true dialogue with God and simple dialogue with one's own intellect as the difference between knowing something and struggling to find the means to express it, versus knowing exactly what one needs to express. The former is the mark of true locutions, the latter of the intellect attempting to be heard.

As it is, Hildegard is 'given' the understanding of something, but is unable to express it adequately, if at all.

But this letter also shows us something more. In the written texts of mystics we often have two forms of dialogue occurring concurrently: the mystic's dialogue with God and the mystic's dialogue with those who have earthly authority over her. Sometimes these dialogues intertwine, and we see the dialogue with the divine being packaged up and presented as part of the dialogues with the men in authority. Every translator of Hildegard has noticed that this is the case in her writing. Baird and Ehrman, the translators of the Oxford edition of her correspondences, note that:

There is a continual oscillation between the almost abject humility of the "poor little form of a woman" and the commanding authority of the voice of the Living Light, so much so indeed that they often merge so completely that is difficult to determine who is Who' (Hildegard et al. 1998).

What is interesting about these two forms of dialogue is how differently they manifest: the conversations with the divine display a genuine humbleness and love. They seem spontaneous and authentic, 'I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows, I gleam in the waters, and I burn in the sun, moon, and stars' (S. Hildegard and Fox 1987), in contrast to the dialogues with the Church authorities, which seem much more careful perhaps even sycophantic. This is not surprising: the authorities with whom these mystics were engaging had the power of life and death over them.

Even in the case of Hildegard, who was known for her surprisingly strong letters that directly criticize the men in authority over her, her earliest letters to those in power display a calculated humbleness and meekness that worked to win her support and protection. 'Hildegard was systematically using medieval prejudices about women to her advantage, and, paradoxically, her self-descriptions as a weak and timid person give additional power to her writings' (Churchill et al. 2002).

In the letters that remain, we can see three Hildegards: (1) a meek, groveling, apologetic figure, who begs for audience; (2) a fiery, furious, righteously indignant figure who commands attention and respect; and (3) an engaged, open, responsive figure, apparently in love with the Living Light. Gillian Ahlgren also notes three distinct ways of engaging evidenced in the texts we have of Hildegard's letters. For Ahlgren, these are 'concrete rhetorical strategies': Hildegard's expression of visionary experience in her letters involved three basic formulations: reportorial, in which Hildegard merely reports visions in her letters; instrumental, in which Hildegard describes both her vision and her own role as an unworthy vessel of this vision; and representative, in which Hildegard speaks in the first person as both the medium and the source of her visions (Cherewatuk and Wiethaus 1993). But these three ways of engaging are more than simply rhetorical strategies. They demonstrate that Hildegard understood herself to be in a responsive relationship with the divine.

Vassula Ryden

Another individual who claims to be in dialogue with the divine is Vassula Ryden. Also called to serve the divine as scribe, at the age of 43—the same age as Hildegard—Ryden is a self-described Christian mystic, living and writing today. She understands herself to have received and to continue to receive, messages from God. Her position within Christianity is unusual: she was born into and maintains her Greek Orthodox faith, but most of her followers are Catholic. Although she has published books Ryden's has a powerful online presence. All of her messages are published online, as are videos, online discussion forums, and spin-off websites made by devotees about her and the messages. She takes full advantage of the instant and international nature of internet communication to spread her messages.

In 1985, Ryden started to receive messages which she understands to be from her guardian angel (Ryden 1991). This guardian angel trained her to receive automatic writing: a psychic phenomenon where an individual is able to write text without consciously doing so. The source of the words written is distinct from the person whose hand is physically writing them. In the case of Ryden, this source was initially her guardian angel and later God Himself.

Ryden explains that since 1985 she has received 'mystical communication, which continues to this very day' (Ryden 2014). She is very clear about the source and purpose of these dialogues: 'It is God that dictates, inspires and reveals His words

of Wisdom to pass them on to His people so that they know His Will' (Ryden 2014)

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Ryden actively engages with the Vatican, and specifically the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, because she believes that the main purpose of her 'gift' is to bring about the unification of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches (Ryden 2014). Her relationship with the CDF, like those of other women mystics, has been and continues to be erratic, tempestuous, and turbulent. At one stage of her life, Ryden and her teachings were rejected by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as a disruptive influence on Catholic communities—and yet those same Catholic communities embrace, love and support her writings. There is a vast gap between the Vatican's official stance on her writings and work, and the participation she receives from individuals who belong to the Church.

Ryden's interactions with the divine demonstrate a tenderness and close relationship like those of other women mystics.⁴⁸ Ryden understands Jesus himself to be talking to her and responding directly to the fears she expresses: 'Peace be with you; Vassula, come to Me, I am your Redeemer, your Peace; I lived on earth among you, in flesh; I am God's Begotten Son; come to Me and lean your head on

⁴⁸ I refer to Vassula Ryden as a 'mystic' as this is how she self-identifies. Although the members of the CDF actively refuse to label her as such, this does not mean that she is not. As we have seen in Chapter One, the criteria for qualifying as a mystic, and the question of who decides who qualifies as such, are not clear-cut. Although self-identification as such is not sufficient to qualify an individual as a mystic, self-identification along with a range of purported experiences that are described as 'mystical' by an overlapping group of religious and spiritual people as well as theologians, appears sufficient.

Me; I am your Consoler; when you feel miserable remember, I am near you' (Ryden 1991).

Ryden's texts are like those of other mystics before her in that they explicitly take the form of a dialogue. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the form of dialogue implies active participation from two interlocutors. In *True Life in God*, the main text Ryden has published, the messages come in the form of questions and answers, much like the dialogues of Catherine of Sienna. Ryden's texts ascribe emotion and human-like characteristics to the divine. She comments in parentheses on the tone of voice. She also adds footnotes that elaborate on this: 'God spoke very fatherly and intimately' (Ryden 1991). In the following extract the italicized text is Ryden's questions, while the un-italicized text is the answers to her from the divine:

It took me a day to realise what You offered me! I was amazed with myself for just accepting without thinking what You were offering me! I want to thank You, Lord.

Peace be with you; are you realizing its importance?

Slowly, yes! But I'm not worthy for such a grace!

You will have to acquire Wisdom; do not get discouraged though; I will teach you to earn it; you are in My Light and being in My Light you will learn; Listen to My Voice, try and recognize Me; I am Jesus Christ and I am your Teacher; I have taught you to work through the Holy Spirit; I have taught you to love Me; I have poured out My Works on you to enable you to understand Me; I am your Strength; you will be given Strength to surmount your oppressors who will be many My child;

(God seemed sad, and it scared me because God's Voice suddenly became grave and sad.)

Why? Why?

Why? because many do not believe that I work in this way too; some do not believe in Me at all; daughter, I have to warn you; 1 I am telling you this so that you are prepared and aware of these people, since they are deaf and blind and have closed their hearts; they will want to justify their cause; they will tell you that this is not Me, that all of this comes from your mind, they will feed you with venomous theories; they will find ways of showing you that you are wrong, they will let you read their theories. 2 to prove to you that you are wrong; so I am warning you, daughter, do not let men discourage you; do not let your era destroy you;

Lord, what can I do? Unless You protect me with Your Hand!

I will be near you all the time; do not feel abandoned; I will teach you to be strong and you will overlook all your oppressors; I am preparing you; I will feed you to be full; have My Peace and abide in Me; Jesus Christ (Ryden 1991)

The first criterion for an individual to be considered actively abjected is that she understands herself to be in dialogue with the divine. Dialogue is necessarily responsive and active, distinct from passivity. The testimonies of Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard von Bingen, and Vassula Ryden all possess these characteristics. It is this active quality, distinct from passivity, that marks these mystics out as satisfying the first of the three characteristics of the actively abjected.

Chapter Three: Necessary but not Sufficient

Categories (2): One Who Takes Action^A

In this chapter, I will illustrate the second characteristic of the actively abjected; that of an individual taking Arendtian action^A. First, I will introduce Hannah Arendt's tripartite conception of human activities. It is one of these, one that she (perhaps confusingly) calls 'action' that I use in this thesis. Because Arendt's action is describing a very particular type of human activity – and not just all actions – when I am talking about her conception of this particular type of activity, I will call it “action ^A”. This distinction between Arendtian action and all other forms of activity or action is very important, because it is the case that when Arendt talks of action^A she means something very particular indeed. After I have located Arendt's action^A in the discussion of activities, I will explain why it is of particular use to my thesis of the actively abjected. After that, I will illustrate how certain texts written by those who I claim fulfil the categories of the actively abjected, conform to Arendt's action^A.

It is a key characteristic of the individual who is actively abjected that they are *politically* active. I define political action as any action designed to challenge the power of hegemonic structures of political, religious, or cultural institutions, and define action after Hannah Arendt's conception of action: as that which discloses the agency and character of the individual taking it. In this way, the actively

abjected is one whose character and agency is revealed through taking action that challenges oppression and hegemonic power. I argue that Hannah Arendt's action^A is necessarily political because it emphasizes the communal. One cannot take action^A without it being an expression in some part, not only of one's own character, but also of the community one is a part of. Therefore, when oppressive power dynamics exist, when one is oppressed and one takes action^A, one is by default acting politically.

Each of the individuals that I engage with in this thesis has taken political action in one form or another. And this political action is not incidental to them being treated differently by the institutions which had authority over them; it is the reason they were treated in the manner in which they were by these institutions. Taking action^A is an essential condition of being the actively abjected because it is because of the action^A these individuals take that they are abjected. This is not to say that is a sufficient condition – it is not – but it is a necessary condition. As we will see in the next chapter, abjection occurs in response to an event or an act. Moreover, it is through this particular type of action - a type of action that breaks with the old order, or threatens to do so - that they are able to effect liberating change.

Despite the diversity of the time periods I study, and the particularities of the actions I focus on, it is nonetheless possible to identify a particular type of action that all actively abjected individuals take. These actions are those taken by individuals on the edge of the communities their actions impact, or those who position themselves

on the edge of such communities through the actions they take. None of the individuals who fit the category of the actively abjected abide by established rules and norms.⁴⁹ Their actions violate taboos, disrupt borders and boundaries, and blur definitions.

There are many problems with Hannah Arendt's conception of human activity. I shall not defend her whole project. However, Arendt's conception of action as distinct from other human worldly activity provides a valuable framework, and point of departure, for my argument. I will thus flesh out Arendt's conception of action and show how the actions of the actively abjected fulfil Arendt's criteria. By examining action^A as understood according to Arendt's analysis, we are able to grasp the liberative potential in the texts of these individuals.

At the beginning of her chapter on action, in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt quotes Isak Dinesen (the pen name of Karen Blixen):⁵⁰ 'All sorrows can be borne

⁴⁹ We can find examples of individuals who fit the second category of the *actively abjected* throughout history. Martin Luther King, many of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible such as Jeramiah, and Hosea would fit this model. It is important to note that the actions of these individuals are only considered ground-breaking or radical if we apply a conventional understanding of action – the type of understanding of action that Arendt is against – to their actions. In other words, the actions of individuals such as Jeramiah and Hosea and even in some cases, Martin Luther King make no sense according to a telos-based conception of action. It is this anti-telos element of Arendt's conception of action that make it in part, one of the better models useful to understand the role and manner of the actions of the actively abjected.

⁵⁰ It is of note that Arendt quoted a famous female writer who chose a male pseudonym as her pen name. Most famous for *Out of Africa*, for Blixen, perhaps like Arendt and certainly for the woman mystics in this thesis, telling stories was often the main form of action

if you put them into a story or tell a story about them' (Arendt 1958: 175). This quotation is important for Arendt's project, and mine, because it is in the telling of their stories that so many actively abjected woman mystics bear their sorrows, and importantly, those of others. The telling of stories was often the only form of action available to these women.

The Vita Activa

Arendt defines her *Vita Activa* - the name for both a concept and her preferred title of the book *The Human Condition* that expounds it - as divided into three 'fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action' (Arendt 1958: 7). Labour may be easily understood as those physical biological processes of the human body that maintain and allow physical life; 'the human condition of labor is life itself' (Arendt 1958: 7).⁵¹ Work are those activities which are 'unnatural' to human existence but which provide the artificial world of things: 'The human condition of work is worldliness' which is to say that to do what Arendt calls work, is to create the world as we know it; the world of things (Arendt 1958: 7). Action according to Arendt is the 'only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter [as both labour and work do], corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not man live on the earth and

available to her and even that was limited by gender. Blixen needed a male name to be taken seriously; mystics needed divine authority.

⁵¹ Only when quoting from the original written in American English will I use the American spelling of *labour*.

inhabit the world' (Arendt 1958: 7). It is very important to emphasize that when Arendt writes about 'action' she is not talking about what we generally consider to be all action, but rather with a very particular type of human activity. It is unhelpfully, called 'action' by Arendt, which is why I have added the superscript to the term when I use it in the Arendtian way.

Arendt's Action

Action^A, in contrast to work or labour, is the fundamental human activity that is primarily connected to others and connected to the definition of the self in relation to others. Arendt's conception of action^A is based upon a re-conception of the ancient idea of praxis and specifically the distinction between praxis (action) and poiesis (fabrication). Arendt contributes something significant to philosophy by marking this distinction (Arendt 1958).

According to the Aristotelian distinction between poiesis and praxis, poiesis is an act of fabrication the goal of which is the creation of something that is external to the self-enacting the poiesis. Praxis on the other hand, is not an activity with a goal separate from the self: its goal is the act itself. It is this that Arendt is most interested in and it is this form of activity that is an end in itself – praxis – that she links to what she calls action^A. According to Arendt, praxis (and thus action^A) is in turn made up of two elements: plurality and natality – the ideas that all action^A is taken

in relationship with and to others, and that within each action^A lies the potential for radical freedom and change. She links these notions to speech and language.⁵²

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies two apparently opposing traditions of the ideal life within philosophy: that of the *Vita Activa* (the active life) and that of the *Vita Contemplativa* (the contemplative life) (Arendt 1958: 289). She thinks the *Vita Contemplativa* has been heralded as the source of Truth throughout the history of Western philosophy, and certainly since Augustine (Arendt 1958: 12). In this tradition it is only through revelation bestowed upon a passive contemplative man by an all-powerful male God, that Truth is revealed. Since Augustine, it has been understood by Western philosophers and theologians that Truth and knowledge can be best (and in some cases only) encountered through quiet contemplation of a question or of the world. Arendt argues this is wrong. She looks to defend the *Vita Activa*, and shows how it is only through human action that truth and knowledge can be achieved.

Plurality

⁵² Aristotle divided praxis into two forms also, but, these are different to Arendt's. For Aristotle, praxis was either 'good praxis' or dyspraxia 'bad praxis, misfortune'. Aristotle, W. D. Ross, and Lesley Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) at VI, 5, 1140b7.

For Arendt, action is something ontological: it is through action^A that Being⁵³ itself is enacted and revealed. Her view contrasts starkly to a philosophical and theological tradition that understands passive reception through poesis to be the route to knowledge, an attitude that has led to an individualism and negation of the reliance on others. Her conception of the Vita Activa holds that not only is action important, but that it is *essential* to human flourishing and to Being itself. This is because action^A (as opposed to work or labour) is only something that we can do in relation to, and because of, others. She labels this essential element of action ‘plurality’: ‘Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live’ (Arendt 1958: 8). Within action^A then, plurality means that we have the ability to distinguish ourselves from others at the same time as realising that it is only through engagement with others, that we ‘are’; that we exist in any meaningful way at all.

Arendt had an important influence on the work of Martin Heidegger.⁵⁴ According to Arendt it is in the third fundamental human activity, action^A (distinct from work

⁵³ This distinction between Being and being is most often attributed to Martin Heidegger, and is known as the *Ontological distinction*. The use of Being with a capital ‘b’ is meant to describe Being itself (existence, broadly, although this is not quite accurate), and being, without the capitalisation indicates a being (an entity). Arendt also uses this distinction, and so when she says that it is through action^A that Being itself is disclosed, she means that existence (or the quality of existence – broadly) is disclosed, rather than a specific entity, or being.

⁵⁴ The extent and nature of the influence Arendt had on Heidegger and vice versa is the subject of much ongoing and historical debate. Since the publication of Arendt’s private correspondences with Heidegger in 1995, (El Cbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1995)., it has been recognised

and labour) that Being itself is revealed or created. One cannot be other than in relation to others. Humans reveal their otherness by taking action^A, and for Arendt, it is through speech that human distinctiveness (which all living things possess) is transformed into otherness (which only humans possess).

For Arendt ‘human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings’ (Arendt 1958: 176) and this is because it is only in plurality – in the fact that we are all only ever human beings – that our uniqueness can be expressed. ‘Human plurality,’ Arendt writes, is ‘the basic condition of both action and speech’ (Arendt 1958: 175).

The meta-critique of Modernist ideas and philosophy that Arendt offers is ‘the claim that the philosophical tradition has divorced freedom from the political realm, transposing it inwards as attributes of will and thought’ (Siemens 2005: 107). This is not a small claim of course and it is one of the reasons her work and specifically her particular conception of action^A is so useful in my own work. I agree with Arendt’s critique of the Western philosophical and political tradition and it is

that they maintained a passionate and intellectually complex relationship. Although Heidegger was Arendt’s university professor when they met, their relationship developed into one of intellectual equals. It is not possible for one party not to become influenced by the thinking and writing of another when in such a close relationship as Arendt’s concept of plurality attests. It seems a fair assumption, then, and one supported by the writings that both philosophers produced, to claim that Heidegger was influenced by Arendt. Of course this influence is less obvious and explicit than the influence the work of Edith Stein had on Heidegger. There is a case to be made that large parts of Heidegger’s famous Being and Time were lifted directly from the work of Stein. But this argument is not for here. An insight into the relationship between Stein and Heidegger can be found in Alasdair C. Macintyre, *Edith Stein : A Philosophical Prologue, 1913-1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

particularly notable that her distinction between poiesis and praxis tracks the influence of Augustine, because it is an Augustinian understanding of the role of the individual, specifically the individual contemplative, that so strongly influences the Holy See's and the Roman Curia's understanding and attitude to mysticism and individual mystics.

If Arendt's critique were not valid, if the theology of the Roman Catholic Church was not as strongly influenced by an Augustinian individualism, then her reconception of action^A as poiesis would be less relevant to my own work. Indeed if Roman Catholic theology were not as influenced by Augustinian individualism with an emphasis on divine revelation, the way in which the Roman Curia engage with those who claim dialogue with the divine would be different, and this thesis would be redundant.

Nativity

The other essential element of Arendtian action^A is natality. Natality is the idea that within every action lies the potential for a radically new beginning. In all and every action^A lies a new birth: 'the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting' (Arendt 1958: 9). In this way, natality is the absolute radical freedom to always start again, to initiate a totally new way of being:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world (Arendt 1958: 177-8).

In the behaviour and action^A of the actively abjected we can see this characteristic: of actions^A that break from tradition that disrupt the status-quo that violate taboos, and break from the old order. As we will see in the next chapter these are also all characteristics of the abject, at least according to Kristeva. Political revolution is action^A writ large for Arendt, 'revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning' (Arendt 1963: 21). In revolutions people understand and clearly see the power of action^A and its ability to define and give identity to human Being. They also confront us with a direct engagement with radical freedom: with revolutions one is made aware of all possibilities, including those previously hidden by oppression:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. [...] The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.(Arendt 1958: 177-8)

Hannah Arendt's conception of action^A is important and influential for political philosophy, particularly for those of us working to effect liberation

from political oppression.⁵⁵ According to Arendt, genuine political action^A is a form of praxis and not poiesis meaning that we need to take action that has its goal as the act in itself. If we are to effect political change, we must be differently.

Whilst Arendt marks an important distinction her work is not without problems. The most troubling is her division between the three forms of activity: Work, Labour and Action. Despite agreeing with her critique of modernism I do not want to defend Arendt's way of understanding human activity in its entirety. Her desire to distinguish certain activities from others because of their relation to other beings is helpful, and can help us to articulate what it is to be human. It seems to me that Arendt is trying to make the point that certain activities by their very nature manifest and create a particular type of being in the world. I think it is useful to attempt to identify these activities and pull them out from the maelstrom of other activities that we all engage with as beings.

However, problems arise when she attempts to distinguish these activities from activities she labels Labour or Work. How do we police these borders? Why can eating food, for example, not be considered Action^A and only Work? Or is Labour?

⁵⁵ See John R. Pottenger, *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology : Toward a Reconvergence of Social Values and Social Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) at 162. Also Emily Leah Silverman, Dirk Von Der Horst, and Whitney Bauman (eds.), *Voices of Feminist Liberation* (Routledge, 2014b), Emily Leah Silverman, Dirk Von Der Horst, and Whitney Bauman (eds.), *Voices of Feminist Liberation* (Routledge, 2014a).

What makes it so?⁵⁶ All absolute categorisations, like all binaries, fail as adequate ways of describing the world we live in because Being does not sit neatly in any one space. For a categorisation to be helpful, it must allow space for something to fit it or not. When there is an absolute model of categorisation that one claims everything must fit, problems arise. So why, considering these important objections, do I appeal to Arendt's concept of action^A?

Arendt's action^A is important because it offers a conception of political action that places it at the heart of existence as a human, itself. Within Arendt's action^A is a radical responsibility to the other members of humanity as well as an ability to effect change. If all actions^A have at their core an ability (that might not be realised, of course) to propose a radically new way of being in the world, a radical new way of things being done, then with this ability comes the responsibility to use this power to change, or not. Of course, according to Arendt, one can act without effecting change, but it would not be action^A.⁵⁷ Moreover, this change and action are directly related to community – one cannot take action^A without it being intrinsically linked to other people. Arendt is keen to 'combat the reductionist character of the teleological model of action' – the understanding that action^A is always towards a certain end – by 'exposing the nihilistic consequences of denying meaning or value

⁵⁶ I develop a discussion of the problems with Arendt's tri-part division of activities in Catherine Tomas, 'The Active Work of Political Change', *Philosophical Accounts of Action from Suarez to Davidson* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵⁷ One of the problems with the tripartite conception of human activity is that it is not clear what happens to activities that do not seem to fit any of the three categories. If someone acts in a way, for example, that does not effect change, but their action is not obviously a form of Work or Labour – then what is it?

to the realm of action and appearances' (Villa 1992: 276). Action^A, for Arendt, is valuable in and of itself. 'action is now seen in terms of *performance*' (Villa 1992).

When this action^A is intentionally engaging with plurality and natality, significant change can occur. Arendt's concept of action^A offers a way of understanding the lives and actions of those individuals who have been on the borders of religious communities and who have effected change that highlights their liberating potential. We can find evidence within the texts of these individuals of action that contains both plurality and natality.

The way in which the texts written by the actively abjected, who are often labelled as Christian mystics, have been read and used has painted their authors as distinctly passive. As we have seen, most scholarship on women Christian mystics portrays them as both mentally and physically weak, psychologically passive, and not as autonomous agents. These readings are misreadings. While it is indisputably the case that these women were oppressed by the patriarchal religious institution they were a part of, they were not weak nor passive in their engagement with them and often-times fought against its domination of their lives and spirituality. This is an important point, particularly for my thesis, because my argument is that these certain individuals, those who I label the actively abjected, take political action.

When reading the autobiographies, letters, and spiritual writings of women mystics it is difficult not to read them as narratives of abuse and male domination.⁵⁸ Evidently, these texts betray the oppressive environments and culture of their authors, but I wish to show how it is possible, despite the problematic nature of the texts, to show how they betray real autonomous action. It is this action^A that the women mystics take, despite the oppression they encountered in their lives, that qualifies them in the second of the three categories of being actively abjected.

Narratives of Abuse?

I have to make two points clear. First, the texts of women mystics such as Teresa of Avila and Hildegard of Bingen betray a particular relationship with an *abusive* male Christian God. This is a contentious claim, but one that is strongly supported and evidenced by their own texts, as I will demonstrate below. Secondly, despite this dysfunctional relationship these women were not simply passive receptive vehicles for the divine will. They did not understand themselves to be such and it is essential if we are not to disenfranchise them from their own actions and power that we do not simply dismiss the political action they did take, as simple submission to oppressive power. It is also important that we do not just take the word of the authors of these texts either –there has to be an interpretive middle ground.

⁵⁸ For a further discussion of this, please see Catherine Tomas, 'Trashing the Sanitized: Re-Reading the Texts of Female Mystics as Narratives of Violence and Abuse', *American Academy of Religion* (SanDiego, 2014).

I will offer a reading of the testimonies of these women mystics that highlights the abusive nature of the relationship they understood themselves to have (and therefore did have?) with the male Christian God.⁵⁹ In doing so, I will demonstrate how these texts are evidence that the women writing them were partaking in what Arendt calls the *Vita Activa*. My contention is that despite the oppressive nature of the relationship they had with God, these women took action^A. Thus we should reject the Augustinian model of holiness – labelled by Arendt as the *Vita Contemplativa* – as an adequate framework for understanding what, if anything, is distinctive about the testimony and action of these women. When these texts, texts that betray an

⁵⁹ The question as to the role and nature of the relationship between the women who write these texts and the male God they understand themselves to be in relationship with, not only has important implications for our conception of the Christian God (because these women were Christian and understood themselves to be in relationship with Christ), but also to the way we understand the lives of the women themselves, particularly vis a vis their relationship to men. There are two important point I wish to make here: that Teresa and Catherine, as I will go on to show through their own texts, had what would be undoubtedly understood today as ‘an abusive relationship’ with God does not mean that ‘God’ or the Divine, *is* abusive, but it does mean that in some significant way, their relationship to the divine was. It should not be a shock that this is the case; all Abrahamic religions have at their core an androcentrism which often if not always leads to those who are not men, being denigrated. As the famous quotation from Mary Daly goes; When God is man, man becomes God. Within the Roman Catholic Church, women have not ever been allowed any ecclesiastical authority –they were understood, according to an Aristotlean understanding that is still in some quarters left unchecked, to be ‘malformed men’ – and these malformed men needed the authority of full men in order to live successfully. What this means for those of us studying the texts of the women Christians in the 10th, 11th, and 13th centuries (or any time pre-some sort of feminist revolution), is that we see the way in which men engaged with and understood women, reflected in their texts. We also see the way in which these women understood what it was to be in relationship with a male person in authority over them. These abusive narratives show that the only way these women understood a relationship between a powerful man and themselves was as a relationship that has at its core, dominance and control.

abusive dysfunctional power dynamic between a male God and a female mystic are used by a tradition that elevates the *Vita Contemplativa*, we lose sight of the active power and autonomy of the mystic concerned.

At first approach, it seems that the texts written by those endorsed as mystics by the Roman Curia present a problem for those attempting to reclaim them as liberative texts. Either the mystics endorsed by the Roman Curia are understood as passive vessels who receive the divine gift of revelation, which is itself a dysfunctional relationship, or else they understand themselves to be in dialogue with a reactive God who, despite their protestations (in the case of Teresa and Hildegard), forces his will onto them. The first reading follows the Augustinian model of the *Vita Contemplativa*; the mystic is understood as a contemplative passive vessel, awaiting completion by a male God. The Second, Arendt's preferred *Vita Activa*.

As we have seen in Chapter Two, this traditional, popular Catholic understanding of woman mystics as passive vessels awaiting the blessing of divine revelation is an inaccurate understanding of the engagements between the mystics and the divine, according to their own texts. Even if we reject the reading that claims these women were passive receptors of revelation, or mystical experiences, if we reject the idea of these women as 'victim souls' chosen by a male God to suffer for His purpose, we are still left with a problematic dynamic.

The very experiences these women were subjected to caused them great suffering, distress and oftentimes violence. The *Vita* of Teresa is perhaps one of the best examples of this problematic relationship between mystics and God. Teresa seems the most human, and her writing is honest. She writes in the third person that it was at 'the command of her confessor' that she 'submit' to write the autobiography and that she had not been 'allowed' to describe her 'grave sins and wickedness' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: i)

Teresa never wanted the life she eventually led. She did not court a relationship with God and she rejected his advances multiple times before finally 'surrendering' at the age of forty an old age for the Sixteenth century. Teresa had been living within a convent since she was nineteen but like many convents of the time it was lax and many of the women who lived in them lacked a sense of vocation: convents were a safe space for women who either could not or did not want to get married. As she describes in her autobiography, Teresa eventually had a revelation or conversion and leaves her lax surroundings to set up a reformed order of Carmelites.

God took twenty-eight years to 'win over' Teresa, to convince her that she wanted to do as he instructed. She describes this struggle and claims that she 'seems deliberately to have sought ways of resisting favours which His Majesty granted me. For I knew that I was obliged to serve Him' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 21). Her resistance and eventual 'surrender' to his command was slow, painful, and violent. Teresa was brought to the point of death by a serious illness (possibly malaria). On

her death-bed she recalls ‘of the twenty-eight years since I started to pray I have spent more than eighteen in this strife and contention between converse with God and the society of the world’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 62).

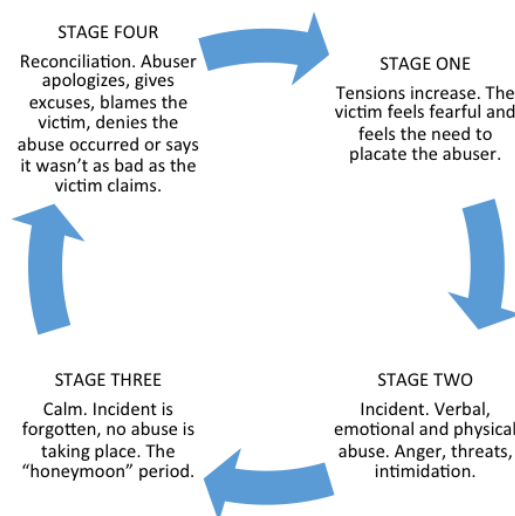
Teresa’s relationship with God was neither natural nor easy. It is only once she had surrendered to him that she is able to look back on her rejection and re-frame it. Even after re-framing her experience of being pursued aggressively by God, it clearly remained a source of trauma for her: ‘When you see how important it is to you to have His friendship, and how much He loves you, you must rise above the pain of being so much in the company of One who is so different from you’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 63). The ‘pain of being in the company of one who is so different from you’ sounds unpleasant. It sounds like God was harassing Teresa. We can read her *Life* as a record of complex and long-term grooming by a male God insistent that He will get his way.

Like many cases of abuse, the survivor marks a point in her experience when she changes her opinion of the abuser, where she re-frames experiences that were once horrific and scary into a safe narrative. After twenty-eight years Teresa eventually surrenders and relinquishes her ‘stubbornness’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 69). ‘Praise be to god, who gave me life to escape from so absolute a death’ she writes.

Another woman mystic who apparently understood her ‘mystical experience’ as that of being hounded by God until she relinquished and surrendered, was Hildegard von Bingen:

But I, though I saw and heard these things, refused to write for a long time through doubt and bad opinion and the diversity of human words, not with stubbornness but in the exercise of humility, until, laid low by the scourge of God, I fell upon a bed of sickness; then, compelled at last by many illnesses, and by the witness of a certain noble maiden of good conduct [the nun Richardis von Stade] and of that man whom I had secretly sought and found, as mentioned above, I set my hand to the writing. While I was doing it, I sensed, as I mentioned before, the deep profundity of scriptural exposition; and, raising myself from illness by the strength I received, I brought this work to a close – though just barely – in ten years. (...) And I spoke and wrote these things not by the invention of my heart or that of any other person, but as by the secret mysteries of God I heard and received them in the heavenly places. And again I heard a voice from Heaven saying to me, 'Cry out therefore, and write thus! (S. Hildegard et al. 1990: 60-61).

The patterns in mystical testimony closely resemble patterns of the Cycle of Abuse. Lenore E. Walker, a psychologist who worked with female victims of male violence, developed a social cycle theory to explain patterns of behaviour in abusive relationships. Walker’s Cycle of Abuse has four stages:



All four stages of this cycle are evident in Teresa's testimony. She describes the tension building stage of the cycle when she resists entering taking Holy orders: 'I was still most anxious not to be a nun...I was more intent on the gratification of my senses than on the good of my soul.' 'But the Lord was much more anxious than I to place me in a state which would be best for me' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 30). This rapidly transitions into an incident of abuse: 'He sent me a serious illness, which compelled me to return to my father's house' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 30). 'Thus, without my willing it, the Lord compelled me to do violence to myself' (31).

But Teresa is portrayed as quickly moving to the third stage: reconciliation. She does as God asks and takes the habit: 'In this intention of taking the habit I was more influenced by servile fear, I believe, than by love' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 32). 'When I took the habit, the Lord immediately showed me how He favours those who do violence to themselves in order to serve Him. No one saw what I endured, or thought that I acted out of anything but pure desire' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 33).

The four-stage cycle of abuse is visible in the testimonies of all of the woman mystics I have read. Each of them describe a period of time where they are scared that their actions are not pleasing enough to God – they want to placate Him, to do what he asks of them, in order to prevent what they suspect is coming – an act of violence. We then also see that this second stage is present. The woman mystic is

‘sent’ a grave illness that she understands clearly as being a punishment for disobedience. After this violent act (the women even describe it as such), we can locate the third stage of the cycle: that of calm, where the incident of violence is ‘forgotten’ – it is not really forgotten, as it fuels the anxiety of the mystic that repeats in Stage One, but this third stage leads to the final stage, that of reconciliation. Once the mystic has acted in a way that she understands to be in alignment with the wishes of the male God, she reconciles to Him and to her new life, before feeling the emergence of Stage One of the cycle again.

This is a reading that is vehemently rejected by those invested in the narrative of Christianity as a religion of compassion and love, particularly towards the oppressed and suffering. It is also vehemently rejected by those who wish to hold onto a male patriarchal God but are not comfortable with the implications of such a God for non-male people. At this point, one may object that this evidence of abuse looks like unlikely support for my argument that the women writing these texts, the ‘victims’ in this cycle of abuse, are agents who take important action, but I contest this.

The resistance of these women, to this overpowering and abusive male God that they consider themselves to be in dialogue with, shows precisely that they had agency. Their resistance, in the case of Teresa of over twenty-eight years, demonstrates that these women were not living the *Vita Contemplativa* but instead

the *Vita Activa*. And it is this action which leads them to the next stage of my three-part model of the actively abjected.

Much writings on woman mystics, perhaps specifically Christian woman mystics, focuses on mystical texts as resources to support an oppressive form of femininity and Christian life; one that is directly linked to the *Vita Contemplativa*. In these books, websites, and commentaries on the texts of these women, the writings are stripped from their authors and understood as resources to lead people towards 'saintliness' when saintliness implies passivity and receptivity.⁶⁰ Not only are the texts treated as resources, but their authors are too. As the blurb from one such book on the work of Teresa of Avila puts it, 'Teresa belongs to everyone' (MacCaffrey 2015). Instead of liberative texts, these writings are used to suppress true political action, to suppress change, and to maintain oppression.⁶¹ And they do this by embracing what Arendt called the *Vita Contemplativa*: by reading the texts of these mystics not as narratives of active engagement but of passive reception.

⁶⁰ An example of this comes from a contemporary evangelical Christian woman, Lysa TerKeurst, who runs a multi-million dollar business as president of Proverbs 31 Ministries. A *New York Times* best-selling author, TerKeurst has a facebook page with 2.8 million followers, where she posts 'inspirational Christian messages' such as the following:

'A teachable heart.
A willing Spirit.
A bendable will.
A loving attitude.

This is a woman guided by God.' Lysa TerKeurst, 'Proverbs 31 Ministries Photos', <<https://www.facebook.com/Prov31Ministries/photos/a.390955286960.162138.99550061960/10153020737916961/?type=1&fref=nf&pnref=story>>, accessed 30/07/15

⁶¹ See Peter Thomas Rohrbach, 'Conversation with Christ: Teaching of St. Teresa of Avila on Personal Prayer', (Tan Books, 1984).

When an individual is endorsed as a mystic by any religious authority, their writings are also immediately endorsed as instructional or inspirational texts, and often become part of the canon of text of the religion. Consequently, the texts acquire influence. The texts of those endorsed by mystics by the Holy See are used by the Church to endorse and encourage a particular type of behaviour and action, specifically, a form of non-action or passivity. As well as showing how action according to the Arendtian conception of the concept is essential to the definition of the Actively abjected, I use Arendt's conception of action^A to argue that it is wrong to read these texts as examples of a passive form of mysticism, a mysticism which has traditionally (and in some places, still) been presented as a preferable and 'authentic' form of mysticism is problematic. These individuals were in no way passive.

As Arendt writes:

A life without speech and without action, on the other hand—and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word—is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men (Arendt 1958: 176).

There is no life without speech and action. The role of plurality in action for Arendt 'makes possible the peculiar freedom of political action.' This freedom is 'the very opposite of "inner freedom", the inward space into which men escape from external coercion and *feel free*' (Arendt in Villa 1992: 277).

Silence and a lack of action is the antithesis of Arendt's model of the *Vita Activa*. Speech and language also play an important role in Arendt's schema of action. Thus her thinking links naturally to that of Julia Kristeva's (or Kristeva's is linked to Arendt's) in that, specific differences aside, both mark the linguistic and the use of language as the defining factor in the formation of human Being.

This emphasis on speech and action, and speech *as* action, and the element of natality within action, makes Arendt's concept of action so helpful in understanding and reading the work of women mystics. As I am illustrating through the formation of these three categories, not all considered 'mystics' are actively abjected and not all the actively abjected are considered mystics (some are considered heretics or possessed by demons, for example). But it is valuable to note that a large amount of the examples I offer here of the actively abjected are also at one time or another (because their position and status changes depending of a variety of different factors) endorsed as mystics of the Church.

Mystics who take Action

I am intentionally using the term 'mystic' in the context of this discussion. In this chapter I take it to mean any individual who understands themselves to have had or to be having dialogue with the divine. This is of course a more refined definition of that offered by the standard model of mysticism. My use of the term 'mystic' here is not meant to indicate that all mystics must claim dialogue with the divine, but

rather that I understand all those who claim to have dialogue with the divine as mystics.⁶² It helps here to use this term when discussing the use of the texts of these individuals endorsed as mystics by the Roman Curia. It is because I am interested in marking this distinction between active and passive specifically within the writings of and about Christian mystics endorsed as such by the Roman Curia that I find it useful to use this term.

Arendt is not the only person to note the distinction between the Active and the Contemplative in the history of European thought and theology. As we have seen in Chapter One, there has long been a distinction within the scholarly study of what is broadly understood as mysticism, between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ mysticism. Various mystical texts make this distinction, and scholars of mysticism have maintained this binary since mysticism developed as an academic discipline. In his survey of mysticism, F. C. Happold points out the various stages of mystical union described by Richard of Victor, one of the most important twelfth century mystics:⁶³

In the first degree, God enters into the soul and she turns inwards into herself. In the second she ascends above herself and is lifted up to God. In the third the soul, lifted up to God, passes over altogether into Him. In the fourth the soul goes forth on God’s behalf and descends below herself (Richard of Saint Victor in Egan 1991: 193).

⁶² This is not to say that they are the actively abjected – to be such would require the intersection of all three categories.

⁶³ Richard of Saint Victor is considered to be the first person to attempt to create a systematic theology of mysticism. Previous to his work, mystical experience was not understood as being related to scripture or any theology.

Here, Happold makes the point that Richard's fourth degree of mystical union can be read as a call to action. When the soul 'descends below herself', Happold claims, Richard is talking about returning to engage with the everyday world. For Happold, this movement indicates a distinct type of mysticism: 'To the mysticism of understanding and knowledge and of union and love I would add the mysticism of action' (Happold 1963: 101-2). It is here we see for the first time, the distinction between the 'mysticism of action' coined by Happold, and 'active mysticism'.

Happold elaborates:

The true mystic is not like a cat basking in the sun, but like a mountaineer. At the end of his quest he finds not the enervating isle of the Lotus Eaters, but the sharp, pure air of the Mount of Transfiguration. The greatest contemplatives, transfigured on this holy mountain, have felt themselves called upon to 'descend below themselves', to take on the humility of Christ, who 'took upon Him the form of a servant', and, coming down to the plain, to become centers of creative energy and power in the world (Happold 1963: 101).

Although Happold is not the only or indeed first scholar of mysticism to mark out different types of mysticism, he is the first to mark out a mysticism of action as a distinct form of mysticism. The most interesting and important distinction between forms of mysticism has been between 'active' and 'passive'. But this distinction is not the same distinction he makes, and the one I want to develop here, using Arendt.

This division between active and passive relates to contemplation: a key element of mysticism and what has been called mystical experience. Much discussion of mysticism has focused on contemplation as either the method of communication

with the divine, or the medium through which the divine could communicate with the individual. This distinction, between the mystic who actively attempts to cultivate a spiritual environment suitable to communicate with God, and the mystic who is spontaneously gifted with communication from God in contemplation, is the foundation of the distinction between active and passive mysticism. It also supports Arendt's critique of Modernism as a project of the *Vita Contemplativa* because it is passive mysticism that has been considered the 'better' or more valuable form.

Even within this binary distinction between active and contemplative, the same binary distinction between active and passive can and is applied. 'Modern writers on mystical theology commonly distinguish two kinds of contemplation, the one acquired, active, ordinary; the other infused, passive, extraordinary' (C. Butler: 216). As I touched upon in Chapter One, the difference between the active and passive in this distinction is the way or manner in which the mystical experience (understood as contemplative) was reached. When 'active', such as in the example of the mysticism practiced by Evelyn Underhill, the mystic attempts to reach union with God through conscious and intentional prayer. But this even this 'active' form of contemplation is not active in the way Arendt marks the distinction. The 'passive' mysticism in this model is one given or bestowed upon the mystic by God. In this way 'active' mysticism is like Underhill's practical mysticism; something that one does (mystical practice) in order to achieve a mystical union.

In Happold's model, he calls this mysticism of action 'The lesser mystic way'. He claims that 'the word 'lesser' implies no value-judgement' (Happold 1963: 102) but this does not seem correct. Even his use of Richard of Saint Victor demonstrates a belief that to take action in the world requires a stepping down; the mystic deigns to return to the world and busy herself with human matters.

I want to invert this reasoning. Active mysticism, as I am proposing it here, follows Arendt's conception of the *Vita Activa* and is a form of political action that is informed by and inspired directly by an experience of dialogue (or union, if understood as such) with the divine. Active mysticism in this way is not about *how* one receives the divine dialogue it is concerned with what one *does* with this information conveyed in the dialogue, in the world.

This is why Arendt's model of action is so fruitful to consider. It is not enough to simply argue that active mysticism is about taking some form of action towards union or dialogue with God if that union with God requires a broader passivity or reception. Active mysticism, I argue, needs to involve an active, intentional act that moves beyond a self-concerned contemplative communion with the divine. For this reason, Arendt's conception of action with its integral components of natality and plurality, is essential if we are to have a better grasp on what is distinctive about the actively abjected. Active mysticism, then, is political action taken intentionally to disrupt the status quo, an action that contains within it the potential of absolute radical freedom (i.e. the potential of revolution), and that has at its core not only an

understanding of the mystic's being-in-the-world as related to beings in the world, but of the action itself being something that *defines* this plural nature of the mystic's Being.

In other words, the active mystic is one who engages in active mysticism. Active mysticism involves actions informed directly by dialogue with the divine, actions which also define the Being of the mystic because, like all actions, they involve other people, however indirectly. Additionally, this action taken as a result of dialogue with the divine holds within it the seed of radical change. In the case of the actively abjected, this action that holds within the seed for radical and absolute change is also action that leads to abjection. As we will see in the next chapter, abjection is characterized by its disruption of borders and the established order of things. All actively abjected are also active mystics, or those who engage in active mysticism.

Active mysticism then, is something radically other than a form of mysticism that is set up as other to quiet contemplation, and rather, falls nicely into the fourth degree of union with God that Richard Saint Victor describes in his Texts. It is 'In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself' (Egan 1991). This descending below herself is to return to the world of beings, to actively and practically engage in the world. All mystics of action embrace and embody the *Vita Activa*.

Now that we have a conception of the active mystic, I will examine the texts of those I claim are the actively abjected in order to evidence how their actions conform to this model. In these texts we see both plurality and natality, two strands of Arendt's conception of action. I want to reclaim these with the intention of using them to assist the liberation of oppressed people. We may not be able to have a liberated Teresa, but we can have a liberating Teresa.

I am concerned to show that these individuals took the action they did because of the dialogue they had (or believed themselves to have) with the divine. Instead of arguing that the motivation of the authors of the texts I use was from the start explicitly and intentionally 'political', I will show the important element of their action is that it was caused by the first condition of my model, i.e. by the dialogue they understood themselves to have with the divine. Teresa would not necessarily claim that she were a political figure or indeed a revolutionary. It may not matter that Teresa, or any of the mystics whose texts and actions I will examine in this thesis, consider themselves to be politically active but it does matter that their action occurs as a direct result of their dialogue with the divine.

The three categories of the actively abjected must be fulfilled in a particular order. Causality and temporality are very important. Condition one of being the actively abjected (understanding themselves to be having dialogue with the divine) must come first because it is the content of this dialogue that will cause the second category of taking political action, to occur. Likewise, the third category – being

abjected – can only be fulfilled if the abjection occurs as a result of the second category, and the second category can only be fulfilled as a result of the first. All of these categories must point back to the original event of dialogue so that they are all a product of it.

For this reason, individuals who experience these categories separately from each other, for example a mystic who is abjected, then had a dialogue with the divine, then takes action, or indeed, any other combination of these three events occurring, cannot fit the model of the actively abjected. This is because it is that these individuals have or believe themselves to have dialogue with the divine which marks these individuals out as conforming to the broad model of mystic, and it is their action based upon this dialogue that marks them out as potentially being the actively abjected. Their abjection cements them as a (potentially) liberating figure. For this reason also a mystic may not *always* inhabit the space of the actively abjected. It will depend upon their status vis-a-vis the community in which they are trying to effect change in as well as their power relation to authority within that community or institution.

It is important to stress that all three conditions must be fulfilled in this particular order. The causality is essential. If this were not the case, a politician who took action and was abjected, and then later on in life had a religious experience – a good

example of this would be Jonathan Aitkin⁶⁴ – would be able to be categorized as the actively abjected. But this does not seem plausible. The action taken must be taken as a direct result of the dialogue the individual understands themselves to have had with the divine, and their abjection has to be due to that action. In this way, the final act of abjection is linked directly to the divine dialogue. In a manner of speaking one could argue that the actively abjected is a martyr of sorts, although of course, it is not necessary that the individual be punished or killed.

Hildegard of Bingen

Perhaps the best example of Arendt's action^A in the testimonies of those I term the actively abjected comes from Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was constantly getting into trouble with those in authority over her. She is perhaps the prime example of the actively abjected because she repeatedly instantiates all of the categories in the correct order. Her abjection occurs more than once. Her testimony evidences her taking action due to the instruction she believes she received from the divine, and then being abjected because of this action. Later on, when the

⁶⁴ Aitkin was a Conservative member of parliament in the United Kingdom, and cabinet minister. He was convicted of perjury in 1999 and received an eighteen-month prison sentence. Whilst in prison, he claimed to have a religious experience and converted to a fervent Christianity. Few would argue that Aitkin was any form of mystic, and even fewer that he was a force for revolutionary good. Not least of all representing (and exploiting) the dominant power structure of white cisgender, heterosexual male from a very socio-economically privileged demographic, and member of the Conservative party. Because the actively abject are those who challenge the dominant power structure, that Aitkin represents the very extreme manifestation of almost all forms of the dominant socio economic power, makes the chance of his being in dialogue with the divine, very slim.

ecclesiastical authority changes (Bishops die, are replaced, Popes intercede to help her) she is released from this position of abjection.

It is perhaps ironic that the more successful one is in effecting liberating change from within an oppressive institution – i.e. the more change one is able to effect through ones actions – the less likely one is to remain actively abjected. It is precisely because the actively abjected is a counter-cultural figure that this is the case. As soon as she succeeds in changing the culture she may very well be removed from the position of abject. In some large way, it is the goal of all actively abjected to effect such change that they are only liberating for a moment, that moment of abjection which then leads to a revolution in the true sense of the word. This is not to say that they are trying to get abjected, rather they are trying to effect change. The previously abject becomes the highly prized seer, the previously powerful pope becomes the denigrated abject.

There is nothing of course preventing the previously powerful pope from becoming the next actively abjected, providing that he too, believes or understands himself to be having dialogue with the divine, takes action based upon this dialogue, and is abjected because of that action. But this is highly unlikely because of the two foundational assumptions that the model of the actively abjected is based upon: first that God is good, second that the Roman Curia of the Holy See (or any religious institution concerned with maintaining and organizing power) is oppressive precisely *because* it prioritises the maintenance of power above all else. It would

not be likely that a powerful member of the ruling institution would be in dialogue with, and be doing the work of, God.

Perhaps the best example of Hildegard's action comes in the form of letter twenty-three to the prelates at Mainz. As abbess of Mount St Rupert, she had been ordered to disinter the body of a man previously buried in the sacred ground of the monastery. She refuses after claiming to have been told by God that to do so would be wrong:

By a vision which was implanted in my soul by God the Great Artisan before I was born, I have been compelled to write these things because of the interdict⁶⁵ by which our superiors have bound us, on account of a certain dead man buried at our monastery, a man buried without any objection, with his own priest officiating. Yet only a few days after his burial, these men ordered us to remove him from the cemetery. Seized by no small terror, as a result, I looked as usual to the True Light, and, with wakeful eyes, I saw in my spirit that if this man were disinterred in accordance with their commands, a terrible and lamentable danger would come upon us like a dark cloud before a threatening thunderstorm. Therefore, we have not presumed to remove the body of the deceased inasmuch as he had confessed his sins, had received extreme unction and communion, and had been buried without objection. Furthermore, we have not yielded to those who advised or even commanded this course of action (Hildegard et al. 1998: 76).

Here we can see how Hildegard takes action^A based directly on her dialogue with the divine. She writes how it was only after asking the True Light 'with wakeful eyes' that she decided not to obey the command of those with

⁶⁵ An interdict is an ecclesiastical censure that prevents certain individuals or groups from partaking in certain, specified rites of the church. In this case Hildegard was prevented from singing the offices and from celebrating Mass.

authority over her. She is careful to point out that it was when she was awake, alert, and actively looking to see the outcome if she were to disinter the man. This is real, solid, and clear, not a vague sense of what she should do.

Moreover, this apparent non-action (refusing to do something) is actually significantly more of an action^A than if she had simply acquiesced to their demands. Hildegard is fully aware of the repercussions of her actions; she had already been threatened with having her right to sing and even the right to partake in celebrating Mass, revoked (Hildegard et al. 1998: 76). Indeed so clear is she in her refusal, and knowing full well what her punishment would be, she tells the prelates to whom she writes not only that she did indeed disobey their orders, but that she has already ‘ceased from singing the divine praises and from participation in Mass’ ‘in accordance with their injunction’.

Hildegard’s actions conform tightly to Arendt’s conception of action. Her refusal to disinter the body contains both plurality and natality. Plurality is present because Hildegard is explicitly concerned with the impact this action will have on her community. By acquiescing to the demands of the prelates to exhume the body of the man she would not simply be acting as an individual towards another individual but as the head of a community. Moreover, the act itself would have great impact on the way in which her convent and its Holy rights were considered by the members of the wider community. If the body of a man buried in the convent legitimately were able

to be disinterred because of a personal disagreement, the sanctity and integrity of the convent, and indeed the Church, would be severely damaged in the eyes of the community.

Hildegard's action also displays natality, what she does in *not* obeying the prelates in Mainz is open up a totally new *telos* of action – in this case toward disobedience with the intention of protecting the sacrality of interment in her convent's grounds - and it was shocking that she did not do what was expected of her. In disobeying them she sets a precedent for a totally other way of engaging and being in the world.

The tone of her letter is defiant and lacks genuine respect. She almost challenges the prelates to defy her, as she has them. I have already ceased from singing, she seems to be saying, 'in accordance with your injunction' as if this was indeed in accordance with their wishes. The fact of course, was that the withdrawal of the right to music was not something Hildegard was offered in exchange for disobeying their order: it was a threat. A threat, by taking up herself without their order, she seems to be proving is no threat at all. Far from being an attempt to 'not be totally disobedient' her ceasing to sing and celebrate Mass is instead a challenge of the authority of the prelates of Mainz. You can take away my music if you want, she says, but I answer to a much higher authority than you.

She almost writes this explicitly:

As a result my sisters and I have been greatly distressed and saddened. Weighed down by this burden, therefore, I heard these words in a vision: It is improper for you to obey human words ordering you to abandon the sacraments of the Garment of the Word of God, 'Who, born virginally of the Virgin Mary, is your salvation. Still, it is incumbent upon you to seek permission to participate in the sacraments from those prelates who laid the obligation of obedience upon you (Hildegard et al. 1998: 77).

The result of this letter and her disobedience was serious. Hildegard was threatened with excommunication and was given an interdict that prevented her from worshipping with any music at all.

Although we do not have the entirety of all correspondence regarding this situation, there are letters between the prelates and Hildegard as well as from Hildegard to the archbishop himself that add detail to this story. A nobleman was interred in the consecrated ground of Hildegard's monastery. This caused great controversy as at one time in his life he had himself been excommunicated (Hildegard et al. 1998: 79-80). Although Hildegard was informed, and had first-hand eyewitness evidence that the excommunication had been lifted, this made no difference to the actions of the prelates.

Apparently there were political reasons for the prelates in at Mainz to insist on his exhumation. The motivation for their actions appears suspicious because of the swiftness with which they acted, as well as the timing. They

waited until the Archbishop (a friend and supporter of Hildegard) was out of the country to enforce their interdict. 'In any case, Hildegard was obdurate, refusing to give up the body' (Hildegard et al. 1998: 80). It was this act, and the apparent miracle surrounding it, that eventually contributed to her canonization, as the reports for her protocol claim 'that she made the sign of the cross over the grave with her *baculus*, causing the tomb to vanish without a trace' so that the tomb could not be identified and therefore dug up (Hildegard et al. 1998: 80).

During this event, Hildegard writes to the Archbishop of Mainz, begging for his intercession and help. She is explicit in appealing to the Archbishop's belief in her as someone with privileged communication with God and encourages him to take her side by aligning herself with the will of God: 'We are confident that the fire of Love, which is God, will so inspire you that your paternal piety will deign to hear the cry of lament, which, in our tribulation, we raise to you' (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 80-81). She tells the Archbishop what has occurred, from her perspective:

When our superiors at Mainz ordered us to cast him out of our cemetery or else refrain from singing the divine offices,⁶⁶ I looked, as usual, to the True Light, through which God instructed me that I was never to accede to this: one whom He had received from the bosom of the Church into the glory of salvation was by no means to be disinterred (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81).

⁶⁶ This is in fact not accurate- they did not offer her a choice it was a threat.

Hildegard makes it very clear that she is not acting according to her own will but because she has no choice, instead she is being commanded by the greatest divine authority: ‘I would have humbly obeyed them, and would have willingly yielded up that dead man, excommunicated or not, to anyone whom they had sent in your name to enforce the inviolable law of the Church – if my fear of almighty God had not stood in my way’ (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81).

Hildegard puts the Archbishop of Mainz in a position that makes it almost impossible for him to not lift the excommunication, as if he believes her to be in contact and dialogue with the divine then he cannot insist that she disobey His orders. Hildegard refers to a letter written by the Archbishop, and delivered to her by the prelates, ‘forbidding us, once again, to celebrate those offices’. Hildegard is insistent that ‘having confidence in your paternal piety, I am assured that you never would have sent the letter if you had known the truth of the matter’ (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81).

Excommunication may well be the paradigmatic example of abjection. When excommunicated, the Roman Curia makes a specific statement not only that the individual excommunicated is not to partake in the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church but that they are not a part of the Catholic Church at all; that they are what the Church is not. In contemporary times excommunication is radically different and significantly less common than in Hildegard’s time. In the twelfth century, ‘excommunication was the most serious sanction the Church had to wield against

those who disobeyed their laws. Gracian's *Decretum* (Circa. 1140), which contained the basic texts of the canon law, describes excommunication as equivalent to 'handing a person over to the Devil' (Helmholz 1994-1995: 237). At the time of Hildegard's excommunication the act was considered 'like a terrible curse' used by those with power, 'literally a weapon to be unsheathed and wielded against one's enemies' (Helmholz 1994-1995: 238). Bernard of Clairvaux, a friend and correspondent of Hildegard, himself used excommunication as a sort of curse. Richard Helmholz describes how Clairvaux 'uttered an excommunication against' some flies that were buzzing so loudly, he couldn't hear himself speak. After this most powerful of all curses was uttered, the flies died.

In his article, Helmholz explores many different examples of contemporaries of Hildegard's using excommunication as a political, social, and spiritual weapon against their enemies. In threatening Hildegard with excommunication, the prelates at Mainz were not merely threatening her with the removal of her rights to partake in Mass (which they did in their interdict – the lesser ecclesiastical sanction) they were threatening her with death. 'Excommunication was serving as a weapon rather than a legal sanction' (Helmholz 1994-1995: 240). These men did not want Hildegard to conform to the will of the Roman Curia, they wanted her to be utterly abject. I will return to this in the next chapter.

Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila is another example of an individual taking action^A based directly on upon the dialogue she understood herself to have with the divine. One of the most important actions that Teresa took over the course of her life, the one that she is most famous for and that brought her the most trouble, was of establishing a monastery of discalced Carmelites. As we have seen previously in this chapter, it was after a collection of visions of Christ as well as events that she describes as torments, that she woke one day ready to submit to the will of God. By this time she had been living in a Carmelite monastery in Avila for over twenty-five years. She liked it there, as she describes herself, 'I was very happy in the house where I was. The place was very pleasing to me, and so was my cell, which suited me excellently; and this held me back' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

Teresa had no need or desire to leave. The monastery in Avila was comfortable, a large house patronized by wealthy guests. It is important to note that despite the hagiographical revisions of Teresa's story, rewrites that emphasize how she was deeply dissatisfied with the nature of the culture in the monastery, e.g. it being too lax and not holy enough, her own writings clearly argue the opposite. She was happy and content with how comfortable and pleasant life was there. It was because of the desire placed within her, as she describes it, by God, and only because of this

desire that she decided to pursue setting up her own monastery. As far as Teresa was concerned, the instruction from the divine was clear:

One day, after Communion, the Lord earnestly commanded me to pursue this aim with all my strength. He made me great promises; that the house would not fail to be established, that great service would be done Him there, that its name should be St Joseph's; that he would watch over us at one of its doors and Our Lady at the other; that Christ would be with us; that the convent would be a star, and that it would shed the most brilliant light (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

This action was not welcomed by everyone not least of all Teresa herself. The real challenge she faced after her own unwillingness to leave the comfort of Avila, was from the Roman Curia. According to Teresa, Christ himself foresaw the troubles she would encounter and right from the beginning instructed her accordingly. 'He told me to convey His orders to my confessor, with the request that he should not oppose them or in any way hinder my carrying them out' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

Despite having the support of her spiritual advisor, as well as another nun she describes as her 'companion', the idea was rejected and ridiculed by those in ecclesiastical authority. 'Hardly had this news of this begun to spread around the place than there fell upon us a persecution so severe that it would not be possible to describe it in a few words. They talked, they laughed at us, and they declared that the idea was absurd' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 238).⁶⁷

⁶⁷ I will return to this series of events, and the response Teresa receives from the authorities, in the next and final chapters as it is a good example of what I term abjection.

Teresa's action^A like Hildegard's, was taken in direct response to her dialogue with the divine. Despite there being 'hardly anyone among the prayerful, or indeed in the whole place, who was not against us, and did not consider our project absolutely absurd', she persisted only because of her dialogues with God: 'The Lord showed me no other way'(Teresa and Cohen 1987: 239).

Teresa suffered greatly during this time, and one of the reasons for this was because of the ostracization she felt through this action:

The nuns said that this was an insult to them, that I could serve God just as well there where I was, since there were others there, better than myself; that I had no love for my own house, and that I should be better employed raising money for it than founding another.(Teresa and Cohen 1987: 241)

Her situation was made all the worse because she was unable to excuse herself on any ground other than to claim that what she did was divinely ordained: 'But as I could not tell them my principle argument –that I had been obeying the Lord's commands – I did not know what to do and was therefore silent.' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 242).

Teresa could not tell them of her principle reason to set up the convent because by this time her visions and locutions had made herself unpopular within the convent. Teresa had been accused of receiving visions from the devil himself, not from God, and the visions and locutions she experienced on a regular basis were the subject of vicious gossip. Teresa's visions and the type of people that they attracted - holy

men - had already placed her in a difficult social position. She was already on the fringe of the convents social life due to the visions and ecstasies that she suffered (or enjoyed). Throughout the *Life* she writes about how she wishes more than anything that her spiritual advisors and confessors would be more discreet. She knows that talk of her divine dialogues was rife throughout the convent and that many of the nuns resented her, thinking she was attempting to gain attention for herself through these supposed ecstasies. The plan to start her own convent encouraged this bad feeling and the only truth she could offer as some sort of explanation she was unable to supply because it would only feed into their existing prejudice.

We can see here how Teresa's action is usefully understood in terms of Arendt's model of action. Her decision to establish a convent of her own is a perfect example of action that manifests natality. If natality is the awareness that in every action there is the possibility of creating a radically new and different future to the one currently likely to occur, then taking the action to create something totally new manifests this. Plurality is also clearly visible in Teresa's act: whether she likes it or not, her action has direct and immediate impact on her community and specifically the people she lives with. More than any other action, it could be argued, Teresa's choice to set up her own religious community is an example of Arendt's action^A. It initiates a totally new future and one that is directly impacted by and on the community she was part of and would go on to form.

Vassula Ryden

The final example of an individual taking action based upon communication with the divine, is of Vassula Ryden. Ryden is most famous for claiming to receive messages directly from God in which she is told to communicate His wishes regarding ecumenism to the leaders of the major Christian Churches. Ryden understands that she has been chosen to convey messages from God to the Pope and, according to her testimony, God wishes all of the Churches to be united. Ryden claims that this wish was conveyed to her directly on multiple occasions. She continues to engage with the Roman Curia for this reason, despite their continued attempts to ignore and silence her.

From the very beginning of her communication with God, Ryden was told that one of the main reasons for the communication was to encourage or help bring about 'Church Unity'. She was encouraged by Christ, who she understands to be communicating with her, to give speeches, talks, and to publish her communications with him (Christ) on these topics.

Under the title *True Life in God*, Ryden publishes her communications as books and on her website of the same name. The nature of Ryden's online presence and instant dissemination of her messages through the Internet and her website has meant that a large online forum and community has developed around True Life in God. She

talks about TLIG as if it is a movement and not only a religious or spiritual movement, but specifically a movement for Church Unity. ‘True Life in God is a call to Unity – all in TLIG have the responsibility to circulate widely the TLIH book “Unity, Virtue of Love”’ (Ryden 2014).

There is little doubt the Roman Curia, with whom Vassula Ryden has had much involvement, are anxious about her work as a result of her attempt at movement-building. Not only does TLIG represent a new religious movement of sorts, it is a new religious movement that centres on a fundamentally un-doctrinal idea.

Like other individuals who fall broadly under the category of ‘mystic’, it is possible to identify a collection of actions that confirm to my model of ‘active mysticism’ and that can be considered demonstrations of a mysticism of action. Here I will focus on the real action Ryden continues to take in promoting Church Unity and show how this conforms to the Arendtian concept. This is because it is this action which has been the most controversial and has resulted in her being abjected (as I will demonstrate later in this thesis). It is also one of the best examples of how Ryden fulfils the second category of the actively abjected as this action she takes regarding Church Unity is as a direct result of her communications with God.

One of the most important speeches cited by Ryden herself as well as members of TLIG was delivered on May 25th 2007 in Turkey. It is considered important for a collection of reasons; first, it had a large audience of over 500 people. Second, in

this audience were a Cardinal, two Archbishops, nine Bishops as well as a collection of lay people. Ryden's website claims that this audience was made up of people from 'eighteen Christian denominations and of other faiths' and that 'the speech received a standing ovation from all present for two minutes' (Ryden 2014).

The two most important elements of the speech are her claim that 'The Church is one and has always been one, but the people of the Church are those that with their quarrels, prejudices, their pride and mainly their lack of love for one another managed to divide themselves, and we all know it!' (Ryden 2014). And second, that Christ himself was 'offended' by the continued quarrels, prejudices and pride of those 'people of the Church.' By 'people of the Church', Ryden is referring to the leaders of the respective denominations who reject unity, most important and powerful of these, being the Roman Curia of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is unknown if either of these Churches had representatives present although this is the implication of the text on Ryden's website. By making such strong claims Ryden took some risks. She was already unpopular with both sides of the largest division and her words in this speech do not show restraint.

She quotes one of the messages from Christ as saying:

My Kingdom on earth is My Church and the Eucharist is the Life of My Church, this Church I Myself have given you. I had left you with one Church but hardly had I left, just barely had I turned back to go to the Father, than you reduced My House to a desolation! You levelled it to the ground! And My

flock is straying left and right. For how long am I to drink the Cup of your division? Cup of affliction and devastation! (Ryden 2014)

She continues, this time in her own words:

There are two choices here. The first choice belongs to God and comes from God and that is: to live in love, peace, humility, reconciliation and unity. The second choice belongs to Satan and comes from him and that is: hatred, war, pride, lack of forgiveness, ego and division. It's not so difficult to choose.

There is more than a passing resemblance between this speech and the letters of Hildegard of Bingen to the prelates at Mainz. Indeed, when we look at Ryden's other texts, her correspondence with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, we see a striking similarity in tone and content. These letters are one of the most important resources we have in examining the relationship between the communication Ryden claims to have with the divine and her actions. In the letters, members of the CDF participate in a dialogue with Ryden in an attempt to 'discern the spirit'. It is in these correspondences that we find evidence of Ryden's actions^A being motivated by her communications, as well as seeing how her action, in this case the speeches and writings she publishes on Church Unity, confirm to my model of a mysticism of action and, demonstrate both qualities of Arendt's conception of action.

Later, in a letter to the CDF in response to their questioning of her motivation, she writes:

I do not believe I would have ever had the courage or the zeal to face the Orthodoxy to bring them to understand the reconciliation our Lord desires from them if I had not experienced our Lord's presence, neither would I have endured the oppositions, the criticisms and the persecutions being done on me by them. In the very beginning of God's intervention I was totally confused and feared I was being deluded; this uncertainty was truly the biggest cross, since I never heard in my life before that God can indeed express Himself to people in our own times and had no one to ask about it. Because of this, I tried to fight it away, but the experience would not leave and later on, slowly, with time, I became reassured and confident that all of this was only God's work, because I started to see God's hand in it. This is why I stopped fearing to face opposition and criticism and have total confidence in our Lord, knowing that where I lack He will always fill, in spite of my insufficiency, and His works will end up always glorious. Approaching the Orthodox priests, monks and bishops to acknowledge the Pope and to reconcile with sincerity with the Roman Church is not an easy task as our Lord says in one of the messages; it is like trying to swim in the opposite direction of a strong current, but after having seen how our Lord suffers in our division I could not refuse our Lord's request when asked to carry this cross; therefore, I have accepted this mission, yet not without having gone through (and still going through) many fires. You have asked: "Why do you take up this mission?" My answer is, because I was called by God, I believed and I answered Him; therefore, I want to do God's will. One of Christ's first words were: "Which house is more important, your house or My House?" I answered, "Your House, Lord." He said: "Revive My House, embellish My House and unite it" (Ryden 2002).

Here Ryden demonstrates the two elements essential to her actions being considered a form of Arendtian action, manifesting both plurality and natality. There are few actions more explicitly concerned with plurality than promoting and fighting for the unity of the Church. Unity of the Church indicates a fundamental understanding that one is only ever a being amongst others, Vassula's concern with unity is due to the understanding that the Church as she understands it can only grow and develop together, as a being amongst beings.

Finally, the radically brave (or naïve) call for complete unity demonstrates her belief in the true potential for radical shift to occur through action. Her public condemnation of Church leaders for their ‘pride’ and ‘stubbornness’ as a reason for the failure of Church Unity so far, may well be dismissed as foolish by those more aware of the complex nature of ecumenism, but it remains the case that it also demonstrates her understanding that radical shift and change can occur as a result of her action.

All of the individuals in this chapter demonstrate a profound ability to take quite radical action, despite the differences in their time, and perhaps also in the extent to which their actions had impact, they all demonstrate action motivated by communication with the divine. Not only this, but their actions, as motivated by communication with the divine, are all actions as understood on Arendt’s model.

In the next chapter, I will outline my development of Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection, allowing me to go show how the actions of these individuals and those like them, not only demonstrate Arendt’s form of action, but *how* this particular form of action^A leads to a tendency for such abjection.

Chapter Four: Necessary but not Sufficient Categories

(3): One who is Abjected

In this chapter I will introduce my concept *active abjection* a concept that is based upon the *abject*, introduced by Melanie Klein and appropriated and developed by Julia Kristeva. My intention here is to show how my use of abjection, although based upon the Kristevan concept, is a specific development of the term. To do so I will focus on Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* where she discusses her use of the term as well as give examples from the texts of mystics that support my use of it.

Scholars before me have appropriated Kristeva's use of the abject to explore issues of nationality, race and more recently, trans* issues. Social psychologists such as Derek Hook have used Kristeva's theory of abjection to take account of pre-discursive racism (racism that is 'bodily, affective, pre-symbolic' (Hook 2006: 207)) with good effect, and I see my concept of active abjection as being in this tradition, as well as helpful to the development of such interdisciplinary work against oppression.

What is most important in this thesis however is how I develop the idea of abjection and the implications this development of the concept has for how we understand the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church engages with those who claim

communication with the divine. Like Kristeva who appropriated and developed the concept from Klein I want to show that, despite the limitations of the Kristevan understanding of the abject, there is much here that is useful to the study of those who claim divine communication, and particularly the role such individuals play in religious communities.

The third category of my model of the actively abjected is that of the individual being abjected due to the action they take, in turn due to the dialogue they understand to receive from the divine. It is the movement from abjection being something that occurs to individuals as a part of the process of subject formation, to abjection being something that communities and institutions can ‘do’ to individuals that marks my development of the concept. I will show how it is not just that the mystic is the abject of religious communities, but that certain individuals are actively abjected.

Kristeva and Her Project

In order to locate the concept of the abject in my own work it is important to understand how it fits into the work of Kristeva herself. It is possible to identify a collection of themes in her work, many of which hold valuable material to those of us attentive to religious or theological issues. She is preoccupied with language and the creation of meaning and has an interest in the formation of identity or subjectivity. These intersect with her interest in how religious themes, discourses

and narratives create meaning and form identity. These themes are directly relevant to my discussion and interest in the role of the individuals I label actively abjected.

For Kristeva, understanding language and the creation of meaning that occurs when we use language, is at the heart of being able to understand the human psyche. She is both a philosopher and psychoanalyst, and her canon of work spans discussions of the development of the individual from the taking up of language in childhood (Kristeva and Roudiez 1980), the use of language and the effect this has on forming meaning (Kristeva and Roudiez 1980), through to the role of archetypal figures in Western culture (Kristeva and Goldhammer 1985). We must always recall Kristeva's practice as a psychoanalyst if we are to understand her writings. She is not solely concerned with theoretical explorations of individual thoughts and actions. She is interested in exploring these things so as to be able to alleviate psychological suffering. In this way, her work can be seen as a form of secular soteriology: she is concerned with salvation, but does not rely upon any transcendental being to achieve this.

Psychoanalytic Theories and the Role of Religion

Kristeva often writes about the role of religion, specifically Catholicism, in shaping the identity of people in the West and how religion effects and affects our engagement with words and ideas. It is for this reason that many of her theories are directly relevant to those of us concerned with the way in which oppressed groups

within Catholicism have their identity created, and how they are used to create and shape the identity of Catholicism. Although she focuses on Catholicism, the religion of her parents, Kristeva has also written on Islam, and Chinese religion, although not without controversy. Indeed, contemporary critics, including myself (Tomas 2015) have accused Kristeva of Orientalism and even outright racism.⁶⁸ It is essential then, much like my use of Arendt's conception of action, that we are able to extract the useful models offered by Kristeva from her larger problematic work. I regard this selective use of her theories as a legitimate form of resistance to oppression. We can, and ought, to use the theories of those who contribute to oppression – as there is no doubt Kristeva does – to dismantle those same oppressions. This is the intention of my argument and of my specific appeal to the abject.

Kristeva places herself within the tradition of psychoanalysis and psychology initiated by Sigmund Freud and developed by Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein. But she engages with this tradition in a critical manner, and rejects many of its conclusions. Her later writings respond to, and desire to correct, Lacanian and Freudian models. Arguably the rest of her work develops Kleinian concepts such as the maternal and her key theoretical models such as the abject are based upon Kleinian psycholinguistics and accounts of child development. The abject is

⁶⁸ See M Rubenstein, 'Julia Kristeva - *This Incredible Need to Believe*', *Modern Theology*, 26/4 (2010), 666-69.

perhaps the most influential of these Kleinian concepts, and I will discuss how Kristeva develops this concept for her own work, a little further on in this chapter.

One of the most interesting and potentially contentious claims that Kristeva makes in her work is that psychoanalysis frequently replaces religion in Western discourse, and that it (psychoanalysis) is the dominant origin of theories about the formation of subject identity. In *In the Beginning Was Love*, she writes,

As theology, that once vast continent, vanished between the time of Descartes and the end of the nineteenth century, psychoanalysis (along with linguistics and sociology) became the last of the scientific disciplines to set itself up as a rational approach to the understanding of human behaviour and its always enigmatic "meaning" (Kristeva 1987b: 1).

Furthermore she thinks, 'The object of psychoanalysis is simply the linguistic exchange-and the accidents that are a part of that exchange-between two subjects' (1987b: 1). Kristeva thinks psychoanalysis now performs the role that religion once did. Science, to which psychoanalysis belongs, and theology or religion, are the two forces most powerfully at work as influences in Western culture. An ever-present theme in her work is her lament that the two influences of science and theology have produced such limited narratives from which we are able draw when forming our identities.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ The 'we' and the 'our' here are perhaps specifically white western women.

The Maternal

The maternal is one of the most important topics that Kristeva has examined. Her discussion of the maternal and the role of the mother is one of the most controversial elements of her work. She is accused of a form of gender and sex essentialism by scholars who argue that her understanding of the maternal body does nothing other than cement patriarchal and sexist ideas of the female body as primarily a producer, either physically or through the role the mother plays in the formation of the subjectivity of the child. Judith Butler is perhaps the most well-known and vocal of these critics (J. Butler 1989).

Kristeva's concept of the maternal is influenced primarily by Christianity and Christian models of motherhood. Her notion of the maternal has significant implications for both how women conceive of themselves as well as how mothers engage with their children. However, the role she gives to the maternal is not only important for this reason: the maternal is central to the development of the individual. It is here that we can start to see where the abject fits into her theoretical architecture.

Kristeva discusses the maternal in two ways: first, she argues that Western concepts of maternity are detrimentally affected by Christian narratives of an impossible maternity (Kristeva 1987a). Because the most significant cultural image of

motherhood is that of the Virgin birth of Jesus - a physical impossibility for human mothers - she claims this leads to a situation whereby the subconscious understanding of maternity and motherhood is one in which women are predestined to fail (Kristeva 1987a).

For Kristeva, no word is simply a word. When we use language we not only utilize symbolic tools (words), we create new meaning for these tools albeit unintentionally, so that the next time that a word or combination of words are used, the meaning they hold is slightly changed. The meaning we associate with words and language is directly linked to our signifying dimension of language: she calls this 'the symbolic'. In this way, when we say 'mother' we signify a relation to the subject. In the West, it is the Catholic tradition that places values and other meanings on the relations of 'mother' to 'child' and these signifying relations make up narratives in culture. She argues that we suffer from a paucity of resources and models of maternity and motherhood, leading to a very narrow understanding of meaning connected to this word (Kristeva 1987a) (Kristeva 2002).

The role of the mother is also an important element of Kristeva's theory of subject formation. It is the mother that is abjected by the child in order for the child to gain subjectivity (Kristeva 1980). The theory of abjection is perhaps the central theme in Kristeva's work, and it is the theme and concept that I use here. In order to understand the abject however, it is essential to contextualize it within the discussion of the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*.

The Semiotic and The Symbolic

Kristeva writes: ‘Western man, using ‘semiotic’ rather than ‘symbolic’ means, re-establishes a continuity or fusion with an Other that is no longer substantial and maternal but symbolic and paternal’ (Kristeva 1987b: 24). In *Sèméiôtikè. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* [Desire in Language (Kristeva and Roudiez 1980)] (Kristeva 1969) we see Kristeva's use of the terms semiotic and symbolic together to create a model of meaning-making. The semiotic is variously understood as a field, a space, and a realm. These location-related words may seem rather imprecise – and these are criticisms of Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and symbolic – but they are carefully chosen. The semiotic is best understood as a stage of development entered by the developing psyche of the child (most often but not always).

The semiotic is closely related to the pre-Oedipal stage of development described by Freud (Freud 1931) and is located before the 'Mirror-stage' described by Lacan (Lacan and Fink 2002) . Importantly, this stage or realm is pre-linguistic – it occurs before the developing child or individual has access to language, and as such, is associated with sensational, rhythmic, and basic, unconscious drives and desires. Nothing in the semiotic has meaning because it is in engagement with the symbolic – the second part of Kristeva's model of meaning creation - that meaning is created.

The semiotic and the symbolic are two inextricable parts of a whole process which leads to meaning.

In this model, the symbolic is the space of language. It is when the child enters this stage of development – of 'taking up language' as Kristeva puts it – that it is able to distinguish itself from its mother and subsequently from other individuals. This distinguishing itself from the maternal is the particular event that Kristeva terms abjection.

The symbolic realm is associated with words and language. Meaning is formed when the drives, feelings, and desires of the semiotic erupt into the symbolic, that is, when the child starts to associate words and language with its experiences (some would say it is only at this time that these become experiences as before they were without meaning). Abjection is the process through which this eruption of the semiotic into the symbolic occurs, thereby making meaning, and at the same time forming the subjectivity of the child. The abjection of the mother is the process by which the child enters the realm of language and moves from the semiotic into the symbolic.

The Kleinian Concept of Abjection

Kristeva is clear that much of her work derives from an attempt to re-read and develop the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein. Kristeva wrote a biography of

Klein (Kristeva 2002) as part of her trilogy on female genius. Klein is credited with co-creating and developing object relations theory – the understanding of how the psyche is developed in relation to others in the environment (Klein 1975). It was as part of object relations theory that Klein developed the idea of the abject. This theory came about when attempting to work out the process of subject formation in relation to her theory of projective identification.

Projective identification is the process whereby the individual projects onto other objects (or individuals) parts of the self so as to make them safe. Projective identification ‘helps the ego to overcome anxiety by ridding it of danger and badness...The processes of splitting off parts of the self and projecting them into objects are thus of vital importance for normal development as well as for abnormal object-relation’ (Klein 1975: 9).

This process occurs at the pre-oedipal stage of psyche development before the psyche is formed as well as being a process that the individual can return to in adult life. What the theory of the process of projective identification shows is ‘that relationships and identities are unstable during that stage or mode, of the psyche’ (Kristeva 2002: 72). Because of this, it is not possible to speak of ‘objects’ as distinct from subjects. As Kristeva says, ‘The very notion of the object becomes increasingly irrelevant in the light of the fluid exchange of fragments expelled without and integrated within.’ This means that ‘because we cannot be certain of the identities that describe the archaic link between the ego and the Other [we do

not know what the not-yet-psyche recognises as self and what it recognises as Other], it may be more helpful to speak of an *abject* rather than of an ego or an object already there' (Kristeva 2002: 72).

In this way:

The future subject is founded upon a dynamic of abjection whose optimal quality is fascination. And if this future subject readily grants himself a "presence" of other people that he internalizes as much as it expels, he is not facing an object but, in fact, an *ab-ject*, with this *a* understood in the privative sense of the prefix, that is, as vitiating the object as well as the emerging subject. It is a subject and an object that, as such, are crystallized only through what Klein calls the "depressive position" or, strictly, through the castration ordeal, the solution of the Oedipus conflict, and the creative acquisition of language and thought (Kristeva 2002: 72-3).

It is from here that Kristeva develops her own conception of the abject. Klein has set up the term *ab-ject* to indicate that which is neither object nor subject in relation to the individual's psyche, and yet still holds a particular power and a particular role. Kristeva pushes this further. 'As a figure of fascination as well as abjection, this narcissistic state of the early object relation, which I have described as *abject* and an *abjection*, challenges not only pathology, but limit states of sublimation as well: it challenges the sacred and the mystic as well as the difficulties posed by modern art' (Kristeva 2002: 73).

The Kristevan Concept of Abjection

It is in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* that Kristeva expands on this conception of the abject.

The book is not long (only 215 pages) but considering the abject was for Klein little more than a note is significant in its content. For Kristeva:

De l'objet, l'abject n'a qu'une qualité – celle de s'opposer à *je*. Mais si l'objet, en s'opposant, m'équilibre dans la trame fragile d'un désir de sens qui, en fait, m'homologue indéfiniment, infiniment à lui, au contraire, *l'abject*, objet chu, est radicalement un exclu et me tire vers là où le sens s'effondre (Kristeva 1980: 9).

[The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to the *I*. What is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses (Trans. mine).

The formation of subjects through expulsion is central to Kristeva's conception of the abject. The abject is what the developing psyche violently and aggressively does not wish to be. The developing psyche expels those things against which it defines itself. The abject are those things which define subjectivity because are made 'the other' but not the 'the Other'. This distinction separates things which have a status either as an object, or as a subject (the Other), and those things which lie outside this binary. The abject is not 'the Other' because it is not any-thing. The developing psyche (and, as I will argue, community) cannot label itself as anything yet, because at this stage of development it cannot distinguish between itself and another. The abject then is an ab-ject not an object; something which plays a role in the formation of subjectivity, but which does not have subjectivity itself.

One of the difficulties in writing about the abject is learning ways of describing 'it' without ascribing either subject or object status to it. Abject is just that; ab-ject,

something which holds no such position of certainty. This lack of certainty is a key characteristic of the abject – and a central characteristic of the abject is also that of liminality. For Kristeva, the abject are those things that lie on the borders of experience which rupture the clearly defined boundaries between who we are and who we are not. The abject is always liminal. The abject ‘Ce n’est donc pas l’absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles.’ [‘what does not respect borders, positions, rules.’]. It is ‘L’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte.’ [‘The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’] (Kristeva 1980: 12) ‘l’*abject*, [...] est radicalement un exclu et me tire vers là où le sens s’effondre. [What is abject leads me to the place where meaning collapses (1980: 9 trans. mine)].

Dead bodies - something not alive, something that *is* not and yet still exists as a physical presence; faeces, something that is not a part of the individual and yet is of the individual, are both examples of the abject. Those things that inhabit the space between certainties, liminal entities that are neither subject nor object. So why are things that inhabit this uncategorizable space so repellent? Because they point to sites of ambiguity, they show up spaces where meaning has no sure footing. ‘In short, the abject is everything that threatens the collapse of order by threatening the collapse of meaning and the annihilation of the self’ (Goodnow 2010: 30).

The Mystic as Abject

My contribution to the concept of abject comes in this next stage. I argue that not only is abjection a process that is part of the formation of individual psyches; that it is possible to see abjection occur within institutions or communities, and that often times this abjection is conscious and active. When one forms and maintains a community, abjection is present. The third characteristic of the actively abjected is of the individual being abjected due to the action taken in turn due to their purported dialogue with the divine.

Individuals who claim dialogue with the divine, take action^A because of that dialogue and are abjected because of that action^A, are what I term the actively abjected – they are those who define and clarify that which most ‘ordinary’ members of a religious community want *not* to be, and more significantly, what ecclesiastical authorities want the ‘ordinary’ members of the community *not* to be. This creation is not necessarily intentional – although it can be – and it can occur at all stages of development of a community. The actively abjected represents something much more powerful than simply being the ‘other’. She has projected upon her the disgust, revulsion and fear the community finds within.⁷⁰ It is in

⁷⁰ My friend Ian Argent, a practicing psychotherapist, reminded me of Jung’s concept of “shadow”; also an image often (but not always) projected onto another. Jung defined it as “the thing a person has no wish to be” C. G. Jung et al., *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung ... Editors: Herbert Read, Michael Fordham ... Gerhard Adler. Vol. 16. The Practice of*

abjecting certain individuals that religious communities define their own subjectivity.

It is not surprising that the actively abjected is often a member of the community that does the abjecting. The abjection of a part of the community by the community is a form of abjection of the self. For Kristeva, the abjection of the self is one of the most powerful modes of abjection:

S'il est vrai que l'abject sollicite et pulvérise tout à la fois le sujet, on comprend qu'il s'éprouve dans sa force maximale lorsque, las de ses vaines tentatives de se reconnaître hors de soi, le sujet trouve l'impossible, en lui-même: lorsqu'il trouve que l'impossible, c'est son *être* même, découvrant qu'il n'est autre qu'abject (Kristeva 1980: 12).

[If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject (Kristeva 1982: 5)].

When religious communities create the actively abjected they constitute themselves by projecting all that they most keenly desire not to be onto a member of their own community, or, in the case of those labelled 'heretic' one who wants to be part of their own community; they 'find the impossible within'.

Psychotherapy. Essays on the Psychology of the Transference and Other Subjects ... Translated by R. F. C. Hull. 14 Illustrations. Pp. Xi. 377. 1954 at para. 470. There is much here to be explored between Jung and Kristeva, and I hope to explore this in future projects, perhaps particularly because of the mystical element of Jung's thought.

This relationship between the community or individual doing the abjecting and the abject itself is important because it is this that marks abjection out as separate from rejection. It is the nature of the abject to disrupt boundaries and defy labels. Even once abjected, the abject remains a figure of power in relation to that which abjected it, ‘Pourtant, de cet exil, l’abject ne cesse de defier son maître’ [Even in exile, the abject never ceases to defy its master] (Kristeva 1980: 9-10 trans. mine). It is this continued defiance – the abject refuses to be labelled as object in relation to the subject of that which abjects it – that marks it out from that which is outright rejected.

This particular element of the abject is noted by other scholars working on Kristeva’s concept of abjection and applying it to various other disciplines and subjects. It is the distinction between rejection and abjection that offers a unique tool in understanding the complex dynamics of not only individual subject formation, but the formation of communities. Working on the abject in the works of two Austrian novelists and play-writes, Susanne Bohmisch notes how:

Il s’agit de ce que le sujet expulse hors de lui, de ce que la société repousse au-dehors mais dont la particularité est que ça continue à menacer le dedans. Le limite entre le dedans et le dehors reste incertaine, flottante. [This [the abject] is what the subject expels from itself, what society casts out, but its particularity is that it continues to threaten it. The boundary between the inside and the outside remains uncertain, unstable.’] (Bohmisch 2011: 9 trans. mine)

If the abject were simply rejected it could not continue to threaten that which did the abjecting. It is this ‘incertaine, flottante’ nature that begins to characterize the abject. When one rejects someone or something it is a single, straightforward event;

that thing is expelled and has no influence on that which did the expelling. But with the abject it is not as simple as that. It is not that the abject is simply able to be characterized as uncertain, it is that the abject is ‘characterized’ by being uncharacterizable. The abject is defiant in its indefinability. Because it is not the subject or the object, ‘L’abject [...] Il est dehors, hors de l’ensemble dont il ne semble pas reconnaître les règles du jeu.’ [The abject [...] is cast out, external to the system whose rules it doesn’t seem to recognize (Kristeva 1980: 9 trans. mine)].

For Kristeva, the abject is so important because unlike the role of objects vis-à-vis subjects, the abject does not contribute to a simple definition of an individual in a certain moment of time, instead the abject has influence over the entire concept of self. Kristeva writes, ‘à chaque moi son objet, à chaque surmoi son abject’ [‘To each ego its object, to each superego its abject’] (Kristeva 1980: 10trans. mine). The abject performs a greater task.

So how do religious communities abject the mystic? The first and most common way is through the projection of impurity. Abjection is concerned with repelling, expulsion, and disgust.

Disgust

It is through disgust, the physical and emotional event of being repelled by something, that abjection is most often and most easily encountered:

Le dégoût alimentaire est peut-être la forme la plus élémentaire et la plus archaïque de l'abjection. Lorsque cette peau à la surface du lait, inoffensive, mince comme une feuille de papier à cigarettes, minable comme une rognure d'ongles, se présente aux yeux, ou touche les lèvres, un spasme de la glotte et plus bas encore, de l'estomac, du ventre, de tous les viscères, crispe le corps, presse les larmes et la bile, fait battre le coeur, perler le front et les mains.

[Disgust of food is perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection. When the skin on the surface of milk, harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pathetic as a nail pairing, presents itself to, or touches, the lips, a gagging sensation and, lower still, spasms in the stomach, the gut, all the organs of the body tense up, produce tears and bile, makes the heart beat faster, makes the head and hands bead with sweat (Kristeva 1980: 10 trans. mine)].

This encounter with the abject performs an important role; it is through the visceral expelling of the abject that the subject is formed. Because for Kristeva abjection is connected to the formation of the psyche in the development of children, she links it here to the child refusing the milk she is offered and through this abjection forming herself as an "I":

Avec le vertige qui brouille, le regard, la nausée me cambre, contre cette crème de lait, et me sépare de la mère, du père qui me la présentent. De cet élément, signe de leur désir, "je" n'en veux pas, "je" ne veux rien savoir, "je" ne l'assimile pas, "je" l'expulse. Mais presque cette nourriture n'est pas un "autre" pour "moi" qui ne suis que dans leur désir, je m'expulse, je me crache, je m'abjecte dans le même mouvement par lequel "je" prétends me poser.

[With a blurred dizziness, nausea pushes me to balk against this cream and separates me from the mother and father that present it to me. This sign of their desire, "I" do not want it, "I" do not want to know, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel. But since the food is not an "other" for "me" who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself in the same motion though which "I" claim to form myself (Kristeva 1980: 10 trans. mine)].

[...] Dans ce trajet où "je" deviens, j'accouche de moi dans la violence du sanglot, du vomit.

[During the journey in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit (Kristeva 1980: 11 trans. mine)].

Disgust is very present in discussions of mysticism and in the actions and bodies of the mystics themselves. Perhaps one of the most well-known and repulsive examples of mystics associating themselves with disgust, is the story of Catherine of Sienna drinking the pus of a cancerous wound. In an attempt to overcome the weaknesses of her physical body, which she understood to be preventing her from a true union with God, Catherine of Sienna forced her body – which she perceived as distinct from her soul – to encounter true disgust.

A sick nun had a cancer on her breast that put forth such an awful stench that no one would attend her in her sickness. Catherine volunteered to care for her but one day "when she was about to open the sore to dress it there came out such an horrible stench, that she could hardly bear it, but that she must needs vomit." Catherine was upset at her own squeamishness and resolved to overcome it. "She bowed down and held her mouth and nose over the sore so long until at the length it seemed that she had comforted her stomach and quite overcome the squeamishness she felt before." (Raymundus de Vineis quoted in Miller 1997: 159)

But this was not enough for Catherine,

On another occasion when she was dressing the old woman's sore the stench again overpowered her and she vomited. Catherine, seeing that it was the work of the serpent, nonetheless took "an earnest displeasure against her own flesh," which she addressed as follows: "I shall make thee not only to endure the savor of it, but also to receive it within thee. With that she took all the washing of the sore, together with the corrupt matter and filth; and going aside put it all into a cup, and drank it up lustily. And in so doing, she overcame at one time, both the squeamishness of her own stomach and malice of the Devil." That night Christ came to her in a dream, and in reward for drinking pus, by which she "despised the delight of the flesh, cast behind [her] back the opinion of the world, and utterly subdued [her] own nature,"

he drew her mouth to the wound on his side and let her drink her fill. (Raymundus de Vineis quoted in Miller 1997: 159-60)⁷¹

Catherine here, positions herself as abject by embodying – literally – disgust. Rather unsurprisingly, the woman who's pus she drank was 'quite disconcerted by this behavior and begged Catherine to stop...At first just annoyed, she came to loathe her, slandering her and believing that whenever the "holy maid was anywhere out of her sight ... that she was about some foul act of fleshly pleasure" (Miller 1997).

⁷¹ This episode, particularly Christ's praise for Catherine's self-abusing actions, serves as an example of an abusive dynamic such as that discussed in length Chapter Three.

The Abject of Roman Catholicism

Disgust and feelings of repulsion are the hallmarks of the abject. We see this reaction to those individuals who claim to be in dialogue with the divine, and this expulsion, this revulsion, is actively enacted when these same individuals are placed under interdicts, such as Hildegard, or ostracized by their communities – such as Teresa of Avila. The actively abjected performs an important role for religious communities, and specifically the Holy See. This role has two important elements. First, by representing and being the placeholder for that which is ‘unknown’ and unverifiable, the individual who claims communication with the divine validates the identity of theologians and the Roman Curia as true knowers. Second, the actively abjected constitutes the identity of a religious community by being that from which members of the community must separate themselves in order to maintain their religious identity.

It is here that we see the disgust meted out to those who take action^A based on the communication they receive from the divine. It is not simply rejection, those individuals who take action^A and are punished by religious authorities are not punished with a view to encouraging them to assimilate, are punished with the intention of being expelled. The child in Kristeva’s example cries out ‘I will not assimilate’ and in the same moment the religious community refuses to assimilate to the actively abjected, or refuses to assimilate the actively abjected, it cries out and defines itself against her.

When one claims to have access to the mind of God, one is claiming a great authority. Those people who claim a specifically communicative relationship to the divine, those who have a dialogue with God, hold an immense amount of power to shape and influence the religious communities that they are associated with. When those people who claim to be in dialogue with the divine take action^A that is understood by those in authority to be against the community (such as challenging the authority of a Bishop, or calling for Ecumenism), then it falls to the religious community to define themselves in relation to that individual. More often than not, this definition occurs through disgust. Like the thin skin on the surface of the milk, the mystic offering her divine communications to the religious community presses herself against the lips of the religious authorities, as it were. They react like the spasm of disgust Kristeva describes, expelling, revolted, and violent in their reaction to her.

The individual claiming dialogue with the divine is already the ‘other’ to many people and even to her own community. As Teresa wrote in her *Vita*, when she discussed her divinely ordained plan to found a new monastery she was ‘persecuted’ by her fellow nuns. ‘There fell on us a persecution so severe that it would not be possible to describe it in a few words. They talked, they laughed at us, and they declared that the idea was absurd’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 238). Teresa describes her relationship with the community at length, and it is clear that she was already performing the role of abject because of her visions.

As much as there is power associated with communication and communion with the divine, this power breeds fear. The individual who claims dialogue with the divine is quickly treated differently by other members of their community. A particular position is given to such an individual, one characterized by awe. The visions, experiences, and communications the individual claiming dialogue with the divine has and shares are by their very nature unusual. Much like the witch in the 17th century, she is abjected. Both the witch and those who claim dialogue with the divine have characteristics of abhorrence and fearfulness projected onto them. Although it may be possible for something to be unusual and yet not be 'other', in the case of the actively abjected, it is her uncommonness that makes her odd and other.

But abjection is more than a persecution. It is not simply that those actively abjected are recognizably 'other'. It is that this otherness, this literally extra-ordinary way of being that they demonstrate through their dialogue with the divine is held to be an otherness that is to be feared and expelled from the community. When the individual claiming dialogue with the divine is abjected, they are pushed out of the established religious community whilst simultaneously defining this community through their expulsion. The actively abjected acts as a vessel for the projected fears, disgust, and repulsion of what is not part of a religious community, and yet it is the condition for its identity as a community.

It is precisely in this act of being abjected that the religious community – or the authorities who represent the community - use to define themselves against her. This dialectic marks the distinctiveness of abjection. It is, as Kristeva writes about the child and its abjection of the milk (and in process the mother who proffered it) ‘Presque c’est la nourriture n’est pas un “aura” pour “moi” qui ne s’alimente que dans le désir, je l’expulse, je me cache, je m’abjecte dans le même mouvement par lequel “je” prétends me poser. [since the food is not an “other” for “me” who *am* only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself in the same motion through which “I” claim to form myself]. The religious communities spit themselves out, or, a part of themselves, when they abject the individual who takes action^A based on her dialogue with the divine.

Boundaries, Borders, and Limits

The best example of how the individual who claims dialogue with the divine is predetermined towards abjection is the disruption of boundaries. It is in this disruption of boundaries, and her position on the border between sacred and profane, that positions the individual who claims dialogue with the divine as potential abject. She disrupts the border between the human and divine by her claims of dialogue with the divine through unsanctioned means.

Through the individual claiming dialogue with the divine, and more importantly her acts based upon this dialogue, the divine is shaken from its clearly defined and

separated position as distinct (from the everyday and the sacred) and thrust into relation with the profane. Through her being in the everyday world, that which was previously safely kept within the confines of the non-ordinary, ruptures into the everyday. Her everyday sacrality challenges the definition of sacred and profane. Because the individual who claims dialogue with the divine is a figure whose being-in-the-world simply *is* sacred, or at least points to sacrality, the distinction between ‘everyday’ and ‘sacred’ is challenged.

Those who claim dialogue with the divine also disrupt other boundary: that of gender power. Those women who claim to have dialogue with the divine who were validated as mystics by ecclesiastical authorities have some form of power within the church, or at least they have the appearance of power. As we have seen in previous chapters, it is a point of contention as to whether the women themselves had any real authority or sway within the wider Church or whether they were treated as puppets by male religious leaders. Certainly in the letters of Hildegard of Bingen we see that she had a certain amount of limited power, but that this power waxed and waned depending on who was Pope at the time.

Even if their power was limited, these women, often poor and uneducated, were seen to have influence, and this alone disrupted the established power boundaries between men and women. Female members of religious communities do not encounter the world from a position of hermeneutic, testimonial, or identity equality with their male peers. Whether in the medieval period or in the present day, a

woman with any authority ruptures boundaries that secure the structure of the Roman Catholic Church and therefore position her as repulsive and repellent, as abject. Although the individual who claims dialogue with the divine may be a liminal figure more pre-determined towards being abjected, abjection itself needs a catalyst. More often than not this catalyst comes in the form of action^A taken by the individual and when this happens the result is the creation of the actively abjected.

Although all those who claim to receive dialogue from the divine may be in a position that makes them likely to be abjected, abjection is itself an act that occurs through agency. This agency is held by the community whose boundaries the mystic disrupts. Being abjected in this way, by an institution such as the Roman Curia that intends to maintain power is something that is explicitly done. This is where my understanding of the abject differs from Kristeva's. For Kristeva, although a subject can be abjected, this is an unconscious process that happens as part of the process of the child developing its own subjectivity.⁷² According to the Kleinian and also the Kristevan model, the child abjects the mother to define itself. What I describe here is linked to Kristeva's concept of the abject. The abject is that which we are repulsed by and whom in this repulsion we use to define ourselves more clearly, making that which we define ourselves against necessary for our own identity. But rather than it being a process that is unconscious and linked to development, here I am describing what I call *active abjection*. A form of abjection which is active, conscious, and intentional – active abjection is a form of oppression.

⁷² See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1984

I will offer here an in-depth case study of how this abjection worked in the case of Hildegard of Bingen, as the way in which she was treated by the prelates at Mainz is perhaps the most perfect example of active abjection because the punishment the prelates threatened her with was excommunication.

Hildegard of Bingen

Although she was not excommunicated, both Hildegard and her convent were placed under a strict interdict⁷³ which prevented her from enjoying, playing, or singing any music as well as from participating in the Mass. Considering that the Mass was and continues to be the central sacrament of the Roman Catholic Church, this was much more than a punishment, it was a wilful exclusion. Moreover, through exercising their power in demanding an act they knew she would not agree to, the prelates were forcing her into being placed under the interdict. This interdict in turn, contained exclusions that they knew she would not be able to live with. Their intention was that she would break the interdict thereby ‘forcing’ their excommunication.

⁷³ An interdict is an official ecclesiastical censure preventing an individual or community from partaking in certain specified rites of the Church. It differs from excommunication in that the individual or community remains a member of the Church. See Rhidian Jones, *The Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England : A Handbook* (2nd ed. edn.; London: T & T Clark, 2011) at 67.

This manipulation by the prelates at Mainz is an example of active abjection. As representatives of the Roman Curia, the prelates were forcing Hildegard into a situation where she had no choice but to reject their authority and place herself in an untenable position vis-à-vis the Church. It is important to note that it is not in the excommunication that the abjection occurs, but rather in the use of excommunication as a threat. The active use of the interdict to force Hildegard into a position where she was unable to worship 'correctly' is where the abjection occurs. The prelates made Hildegard abject by pushing her to the borders of the Church.

The correspondence between Hildegard, the prelates at Mainz, and later the Archbishop surrounding this issue, are perhaps the most famous of all her letters. Letter 23 from Hildegard to the prelates at Mainz describes how music is central to her life and worship. In it she attempts to explain to them that all of her actions (including the refusal to allow the exhumation) come from the need to obey God and that if she cannot have music, she cannot worship. She explains the importance of music to her personal worship and how she recognizes they believe she needs to be punished, but that the interdict is not so much of a punishment as a ruling that prevents her from worshipping God. This is all in vain because the prelates at Mainz do not care about Hildegard's worship. Their intention was never to punish her for her disobedience on this one issue but rather to push her to the fringes of the Church. They wanted not to reject her but to violently expel her, redefining themselves and the Church they wanted to reassert authority over, through doing so.

It is unclear whether Hildegard realized this or not. Certainly she attempts to give the benefit of the doubt to the prelates at Mainz and her letter to them focusses on her intention to serve and worship God. It is written from an assumption that the prelates, however they may disagree with her on the manner best to do so, also have as their intention a desire to worship and serve God.

Hildegard describes the effects the interdict has on her and her community: ‘As a result, my sisters and I have been greatly distressed and saddened’ (Hildegard et al. 1998: 77). Citing her visions and the authority of the Living Light, she also claims that because she was refused permission to sing during prayer and the Holy Offices, she was told by God that she was not performing the rites correctly. This caused her much distress:

Furthermore, I saw in my vision also that by obeying you we have been celebrating the divine office incorrectly, for from the time of your restriction to the present, we have ceased to sing the divine office, merely reading it instead. And I heard a voice coming from the Living Light concerning the various kinds of praises, about which David speaks in the psalm “Praise Him with sound of trumpet: praise Him with psalter and harp,” and so forth up to this point: “Let every spirit praise the Lord” [Ps.150.3, 6] (Hildegard et al. 1998: 79).

It could be argued that what makes a religious community is the communal performance of certain rituals and practices. When Hildegard is prevented from

doing this she is being expelled from the community. Hildegard spends some length in this letter, explaining her understanding of the importance of music to worship:

Consider too, that just as the body of Jesus Christ was born of the purity of the Virgin Mary through the operation of the Holy Spirit so, too, the canticle of praise, reflecting celestial harmony, is rooted in the Church through the Holy Spirit. The body is the vestments of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praise to God with clashing cymbals of jubilation [cf. Ps 150.5], as well as other musical instruments which men of wisdom and zeal have invented, because all arts pertaining to things useful and necessary for mankind have been created by the breath that God send into man's body (Hildegard et al. 1998: 79).

It is clear that as far as Hildegard is concerned, to be denied music in her worship is to be denied worship itself. Not only does she think this herself but according to the dialogues she has with God, He thinks this too. It cannot be underestimated how significant this interdict was, and how significant the prelates at Mainz knew it to be. Hildegard was famed for her music, having written some of the most important and widely shared devotional music of the time. There is no doubt that by specifically refusing her the right to music as well as to receive the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, those with authority over her were not only punishing her, they intended to expel her from the Church.

All of Hildegard's attempts at explaining this were in vain however, and the interdict remained in place. The prelates did not reply to her letter. This is not

surprising as they would have expected such a violent reaction from her, indeed it was their intention to create such a violent reaction. Their hope was that before Hildegard could contact the Archbishop and ask him to intervene to lift the interdict on her use of music, that she would be unable to abide by it, allowing them to excommunicate her.

Not only was she placed under this strict interdict, Hildegard was also threatened with excommunication. Excommunication would be the archetypal example of abjection if abjection were stable enough to be an archetype. This is because in the eleventh century when Hildegard was excommunicated, excommunication was a significant act that served two purposes: first, to expel an individual from the religious community – it would prevent Hildegard from partaking in the rites of the Catholic Church – and second, to define the church against that which was excommunicated. The prelates at Mainz could not excommunicate her without the authority of the Archbishop, someone they knew to be broadly sympathetic to her. The timing of her interdict is notable and has impact on this story; the prelates chose the week when the Archbishop was away in Rome to order Hildegard to exhume the body of the once-excommunicated nobleman, on pain of excommunication herself.

When excommunicated, the Roman Curia makes a specific statement not only that the individual excommunicated is not to partake in the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, but that they are not a part of the Catholic Church – indeed, that they are

what the Church is not. Now excommunication is radically different and significantly more uncommon than in Hildegard's time. In the twelfth century excommunication was the most serious sanction the Church had to wield against those who disobeyed their laws. Gracian's *Decretum* (Circa. 1140), which contained the basic texts of the canon law, described excommunication as equivalent to 'handing a person over to the Devil' (Helmholz 1994-1995: 237).

At the time of Hildegard's excommunication the act was considered 'like a terrible curse' used by those with power, 'literally a weapon to be unsheathed and wielded against one's enemies' (Helmholz 1994-1995: 238). (Recall Bernard of Clairvaux's use of excommunication against the unfortunate flies.)

There are many examples of contemporaries of Hildegard's using excommunication as a political, social and spiritual weapon against their enemies⁷⁴ but my interest here is this particular use of it as a threat. The prelates at Mainz, in threatening Hildegard with excommunication were not merely threatening her with the removal of her rights to partake in Mass, which they did in their interdict, they were threatening her with death. 'Excommunication was serving as a weapon rather than a legal sanction' (Helmholz 1994-1995: 240). These men did not want Hildegard to conform to the will of the Roman Curia, they wanted her to be utterly abject.

⁷⁴ In his article, Helmholz describes these in detail, see R Helmholz, 'Excommunication in Twelfth Century England', *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol 11/1 (1994-1995), 235-53.

We do not have details regarding the exhumation the prelates demanded Hildegard allow, and in part this is because the nobleman himself and the reasons for the exhumation were almost certainly of no importance. The prelates used this burial as an opportunity to abject Hildegard. All that is known is that Hildegard permitted the burial of a nobleman who had once been excommunicated. This excommunication has been lifted, and the man absolved from it. It is accepted that 'The motives of the prelates, however, are suspect, especially on account of the haste in which they acted, while their archbishop was away' (Baird & Ehrman in Hildegard et al. 1998: 79). The prelates at Mainz conspired to significantly limit the power Hildegard enjoyed by using the spurious reason of an exhumation they knew she would resist. Those who imposed the interdict on Hildegard knew her well. They knew that she would never agree to their demands and hence would be forced to accept their interdict. But it was her inability to worship without her beloved music that they knew Hildegard would never be able to survive.

What we see in the correspondence between Hildegard and those prelates at Mainz, as well as the ramifications of those correspondences, is evidence of a concerted attempt to actively abject her. The evidence we have suggests that the exhumation was never something the prelates cared about - why would they - instead what they desired and to some large extent achieved, was to expel a troublesome woman. They did this by forcing her to live in a way which was totally impossible for her to sustain. If Hildegard was unable to sing her praises to God or to worship with any

music, then it is likely she would eventually break the interdict, leading to her excommunication. Importantly however, it was not the excommunication that they necessarily desired or needed. It was enough that she was placed in a liminal position on the border of the Church, which the interdict achieved.

Hildegard's excommunication was not about punishing her for a misdemeanour – it was about defining the boundaries of the Church, establishing control and establishing authorized channels of divine communication. By placing an interdict on Hildegard, the prelates at Mainz, ecclesiastical authorities directly above her, defined themselves against her and at the same time re-drew their rules of engagement with those who would claim to be communicating with the divine.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Active abjection can occur many years - in this case hundreds of years - after the individual being abjected, having dialogue with the divine and taking action^A. And it is also not only those with ecclesiastical authority who can do the abjecting. Although the strongest form of active abjection is when those with legitimate legal authority abjects the individual, active abjection can also occur when members of the Church who have other forms of authority within the community, such as theologians, abject. The way in which Denys Turner engages with Julian of Norwich is an interesting example of active abjection. I have written about this in footnotes because it is not a strong enough case of active abjection to warrant a discussion in the main body of the text, however it is relevant and interesting to my argument overall. I have already shown how Turner can be accused (as I do) of utilising the testimony of women mystics to support his own theology and in the process, of disenfranchising them from their own knowledge. This, I argued, is indicative of the way in which the testimonies of women have historically been used by academic theologians and scholars of mysticism. But Turner's use of Julian's testimony does more than just disenfranchise her from her own experience ('I suppose, then, I could say that this is less a book about Julian's Revelation and more a set of reflections occasioned by it, a set of variations on a theme of Julian'); something that could be an accusation levelled at many of the translators, and people to whom women dictated their testimonies to (Turner 2011: xiii). What Turner does is abject Julian as a mystic. Turner, perhaps a little ironically, in that he attempts to defend one of one of the most famous mystics of Christianity, against what he sees as the slur of being labelled a mystic, projects that which to him is repulsive onto the construct of "mystic" - a label that Julian has been categorised under for hundreds

Vassula Ryden

Another example of an individual being actively abjected is to be found in the CDF's dealings with Vassula Ryden. As we have seen in the previous chapters, Ryden's main form of action^A is to campaign for Church Unity. But it is not only this that has brought Ryden under the scrutiny of the Roman Curia. Ryden was brought to the attention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for a collection of infringements of Catholic doctrine. Although not a member of the Catholic Church herself a large proportion of her supporters are and she actively engages with the Roman Catholic Church and their various departments.

The way in which the Roman Curia have actively abjected Vassula Ryden is different, if related, to the way in which the prelates at Mainz actively abjected Hildegard. Related, because both women were (and in the case of Vassula are still) subject to epistemic injustice by virtue of their ontology - the very fact that they are

of years. In the process he abjects Julian. Throughout this process Julian remains a "mystic" in as far as the term is broadly accepted; she understands herself to be in dialogue with the divine, and takes action based on that dialogue. It is Turner's insistence on her being a "theologian" instead, that enacts the abjection. It is the marking of this distinction between mystic and theologian and the projection of everything negative and liminal on to the former, and therefore Julian, that marks the abjection, because here Turner is defining 'theologian' by expelling the qualities of 'mystic'. If Julian is to be a theologian, if she is to be valued as a member of the religious community Turner is a member of, she cannot be a mystic, because 'mystic', here, according to Turner, is a synonym for detractor or radical. It is unnecessary to insist that Julian be either a theologian in her own right or a mystic. Why can she not be both? She cannot be both to Turner, because the very nature of what he is doing (abjecting) requires a separation between the two; requires a violent expelling.

female and claiming dialogue with the divine places them in a very specific position in the dynamic of power between themselves and the religious institution (and the men who make up the religious institution) they are abjected by and from. It is different because although the CDF issued an official statement on Vassula and her writings, because she is and was not a member of the Church, she could not be held under the same authority as Hildegard.

When engaging with the testimony of those claiming to receive communication from the divine, it may be argued that it is always appropriate to deploy a hermeneutics of suspicion – a concept that Fricker does not engage with but that I suggest here, following Paul Ricoeur. But most often this ‘willingness to suspect’ is not universally applied by those investigating or concerned with the testimony of mystics, and is not combined with Ricoeur’s other necessary characteristic for hermeneutics: ‘a willingness to listen’ (Ricoeur 1970: 27).

For these reasons, it is not that mystical testimony is approached with a hermeneutics of suspicion, but instead that a form of testimonial injustice is suffered by those who offer such testimony because often this testimony is seen as a challenge to the authority of a hegemonic institution or belief. The assessment of the content of the individual claiming dialogue with the divine’s messages intersects with the authority (or lack of) of the speaker herself, before she has even considered taking action^A based on her dialogue.

Despite the experiences and testimonies of individuals who claim dialogue with the divine being used to validate and support religious doctrine, the way in which these experiences and testimonies are gained is often conspicuously un-doctrinal. It is here that the intersection of hermeneutical injustice as well as testimonial injustice occurs for those claiming dialogue with the divine. The understanding that various differing oppressions have impact on each other, and the subject they oppress, is key for my argument. As I have explored in more depth in Chapter One but which bears repeating here, intersectionality is the study of how different forms of oppression act on each other: how the interactions of different systems of oppression (such as race, class, gender) effect and affect subjects.

What I will call, for ease of comprehension, ‘mystical testimony’, suffers uniquely from the intersection of both hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. This is because the individual claiming dialogue with the divine is herself an important factor in the judgment of the testimony. She is an agent, and is judged as such separately from the content of her writings. As an individual, often female and as such a victim of oppression and implicit bias due to her sex and gender, claiming to be in contact with the divine, she embodies a particular kind of threat to ecclesiastical authority. This need not be, but most often is the Roman Curia. Of course this authority can be any institution that mediates the relationship between the individual and the divine.

The individual who claims to be dialoguing with the divine suffers from testimonial injustice because of the nature of who and what she is – someone who can and has circumvented the traditional route of communication with the divine. Women who claim such dialogue suffer from the intersection of a further oppression. As a woman, a testifier is in a significantly weaker epistemic position than a man, and specifically within patriarchal religious institutions. Most specifically within the Roman Catholic Church.

The woman claiming to have dialogue with the divine suffers from hermeneutic injustice because of the very nature of what she claims to be experiencing. As we have seen in the discussion of epistemic injustice earlier in this thesis, hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a gap in understanding regarding what is it the individual is attempting to convey. When it comes to attempting to describe an experience of divine dialogue, a form of communication which is by its very definition something considered ineffable, the individual claiming such dialogue will face hermeneutic injustice. Those who she shares her testimony with will simply not understand what it is she is conveying.

The woman's story will not be believed in part because *she* will not be believed, and in part because the nature of her story will not be understood. The effect of this is that the content of her story is lost or greatly devalued. This is the result of the intersection of both testimonial and hermeneutic injustice.

It is at the point at which the individual shares her testimony that the (often implicit) judgment is made by religious or community authorities as to whether to endorse, reject, or abject the individual. If they are endorsed, they remain in a relatively comfortable space vis-à-vis the hegemonic institution or community. If they are rejected, they may continue to write and claim divine dialogue, but they will not be important to the self-definition of the rejecting authority. This is the distinction between rejection and abjection – that a rejection is a simple act that has no impact on the subject that is doing the rejecting. Abjection however, is an act that in its very performance, defines the subject doing the abjecting. More often than not, the individual claiming dialogue with the divine is abjected.

In the case of Vassula Ryden, this epistemic injustice manifested in a very particular type of testimonial injustice; her claim to know the will of God was directly challenged on the basis of who she was: specifically a divorced woman, not a Catholic. It also manifested as a very particular type of hermeneutic injustice: her claims were challenged on the basis of what the CDF considered to be doctrinal inaccuracies in her writings. She was abjected through a dismissal of her as an agent of knowing, and her writings as specifically ‘undocrinal’.

Religious traditions need a mystical element, they need a cornerstone of their teachings to come from and be validated by the unknown. But it cannot be the case that just anyone will do to fulfil this role. When any religious institution is presented with an individual who claims to be in dialogue with the divine, an assessment is made

of them as a suitable spokesperson for the institution. If they do not fit into the mould of the ideal holy prophet for any reason, then their testimony will be treated differently to an individual who holds the correct characteristics. The use of the term mould is deliberate. It is possible to trace this approach to religious vocation back through to the medieval church, where those considered 'suitable' for priestly or religious vocation held specific characteristics – chief amongst them being malleability.⁷⁶

The reasons for an individual claiming to have dialogue with the divine not fitting the mould of the ideal mystic could include the individual being from the wrong religious background, family, or social class, or having the wrong sex or gender. Most often what makes someone not fit the mould, is that they *already* fit a different mould. They are not malleable.

The intention of the CDF's engagement with people who claim to be in dialogue with the divine is entirely dependent on the characteristics of the person testifying. It will make a difference to what the CDF intends to do with a mystical testimony if a divorced un-baptized woman is testifying. These characteristics will count against her testimony being considered genuine, and will mean that the CDF approaches the testimony with the intention of discrediting it.

⁷⁶ Indeed even today, the language used to describe how candidates for the priesthood in the Church of England focuses on malleability and formation. Church of England, 'Seminary Life', <<http://www.ukpriest.org/becoming-a-priest/seminary-life>>, accessed 10/07/15 2015.

This is more than a hermeneutical injustice – it is not that those who are tasked with the job of investigating the validity of, or of ‘discerning’ the nature of the testimony or mystical events are just unable to comprehend the nature of the events themselves. Instead, based upon the personal, social, gendered, racial and sexed characteristics of the individual testifying, a conscious judgment is made to treat the testimony differently. This is testimonial injustice. What is most interesting and perhaps surprising about this is that not only will the testimony of a divorced woman be engaged with differently from a virgin nun living in community, it is that the CDF will explicitly say that this is the case, as we will see below.

It is only after this testimonial injustice has occurred that the testimony itself and its content will come under scrutiny. Teresa of Avila was aware of this second round of scrutiny. Writing during the height of the Spanish Inquisition, she was extremely careful to make sure that all of her works were written with the Inquisitorial investigators in mind.

Once the individual mystic has been assessed according to a set of criteria for the ‘worthy agent’ of divine dialogue, the investigators of the CDF only then look through the testimony for doctrinal errors and inconsistencies, having decided already whether they are viewing the testimony with a view to discredit or a view to endorse. In the CDF’s engagement with mystics, it is important to note the role played by the intersection of both forms of epistemic injustice, hermeneutical and

testimonial, in their engagement with testimony. Only those who pass the first test of being the ‘correct’ type of character have their testimonies read with anything other than a view to discredit them.

On top of the testimonial injustice all those who claim dialogue with the divine suffer from, living people who claim to receive divine communication have an extra layer of testimonial injustice. There are issues to do with control and distribution of knowledge inherent in any testimony made by a living person: it is much easier for the CDF to endorse the sanitized version of a twelfth century saint’s testimony, than it is to endorse a modern day woman’s.

The hagiography of a long-dead woman can smooth over less ideal elements of her life. The same cannot be done for those who dialogue with the divine and who are still living. The CDF will always favour endorsing the work of a dead woman than a living one – much like a literary agent endorsing a completed manuscript over a couple of chapters – the CDF just do not know what a living person is going to go on to say. Thus contemporary individuals who claim to be dialoguing with the divine face challenges to their epistemic authority based on their very existence.

Another point, therefore, when we discuss the way in which the CDF engages with those who claim to be dialoguing with the divine, is that there is a distinction between the way in which the CDF engages with contemporary and historic testimony. When we engage with the testimonies of ‘mystics’ validated as

‘authentic’ by the Catholic Church we are not engaging with a primary source. Almost without exception, the writings of Christian mystics that survive and that have been approved for distribution amongst the faithful, are like any religious text: highly edited, sanitized, and selectively translated. In many cases, the mystic herself was, as Julian of Norwich described herself, ‘unlettered’ and as such the records of their experiences are actually the writings of their male spiritual advisors. The testimonies of 12th, 13th, and 14th century mystics approved by the Catholic Church are not primary texts, and we should never fall into the trap of engaging with them as if they were.

It is easier for religious authorities to manipulate, manage, and appropriate the words of dead illiterate woman than a living educated woman with access to the internet. The extra level of testimonial injustice then, comes from the perception of the modern day mystic as ‘not quite’ holy enough, when holiness is measured according to a patriarchal heteronormative sex-negative yardstick. The contemporary individual who claims dialogue with the divine has an incredible and almost impossible role to live up to in the beatified image of female doctors of the Church such as St Teresa of Avila. We can see this testimonial injustice in play in the written interactions between the then Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, later Pope, and Vassula Ryden.

Ryden was born in Egypt from Greek parents in 1942, making her 72 years old today. She had a normal life, married a man, had a family, divorced, and then

remarried. This is not an unusual path for women born after the 1940s. Although Greek Orthodox by tradition, she was not particularly religious. One day at the age of 43 and while writing a shopping list, Ryden claims that she felt a light electrical feeling in her right hand and an invisible presence. She says that led by the presence, she 'permitted her hand to be guided' and began to write automatically (Hvidt 2007: 111-16).

These automatic writings where an external apparently supernatural force guided her hand in order to convey messages continued for years. According to Ryden, the authors of these messages were variously Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and her own personal Guardian Angel. The content of these writings were published in twelve books, which led to Ryden becoming well known and collecting a following of people, many of whom are Catholic.

Ryden became known to the CDF in part because she contacted the Vatican herself, but she was engaged with by the CDF because she has such a large following of devout Catholics. Not every individual who contacts the Vatican claiming to be talking to God and Jesus gets an audience with the Pope. Because Vassula Ryden amassed such a large following of Catholics, she and her writings were brought to the attention of local priests as well as diocesan bishops. In turn, these bishops read her work, saw her following, and asked for advice from the CDF.

In an address to given in Mexico on the 10th may 1996, Cardinal Ratzinger explicitly cites her personal marital status and the fact that she is an Orthodox woman, as reasons not to credit her writings. ‘Do not take as the word of the divine what is considered, for the moment, only human and personal. What we have said is that she should not witness in churches (inside the church) because she is an Orthodox and her marital status is not yet clear, being divorced’ (Ratzinger May 10th 1996).

This is not an engagement with the content of her testimony. Ryden is discredited because a divorced Orthodox woman is not considered a likely candidate for divine grace. Vassula Ryden does not fit the profile of a good Catholic woman. She is not a vessel through which Catholic doctrine or dogma is expected to flow. Historically and to this day those who were validated as mystics by the church were those considered worthy of such divine grace. Most of the time, those considered worthy were full time religious – nuns or monks or priests – and they were only considered worthy after their death.

It is important here to note that testimonial injustice is not simply occurring at the level of obvious markers (divorced, female) that certain mystics have - these characteristics which discredit the speaker are manifestations of a deeper injustice. The testimonial injustice is found in a belief that is held by the subject (in this case the CDF) that they are, (or may not be) aware of. In this way it is a form of implicit

bias.⁷⁷ I am not suggesting that we simply need to swap one set of faulty criteria for another; the problem of implicit bias and the subsequent testimonial injustice it brings about needs much deeper critical reflection on the part of anyone who engages with mystics. It is not a case of simply changing the categories of what is to be termed a ‘validated’ mystic.

In the twelfth century, women had very few career or life-path choices: get married and produce a family or enter religious orders. There were significantly more nuns in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries than there are today. Communities of religious sisters are literally dying out, as there are few women who feel their calling and vocation is to live within a religious community. As women’s freedom to choose their own direction in life has painfully advanced, the amount of women choosing to enter religious orders has dramatically reduced.

⁷⁷ In a large research project funded by the Leverhume fund, the philosopher Jennifer Saul heads up research on Implicit Bias. ‘Over the last decade, a large psychological literature has developed on implicit biases. There is by now substantial empirical support for the claim that most people— even those who explicitly and sincerely avow egalitarian views— hold what have been described as implicit biases against such groups as blacks, women, gay people, and so on. (This is true even of members of the “target” group.) These biases are manifested in, for example, association tasks asking subjects to pair positive and negative adjectives with black or white faces: most are much speedier to match black faces with negative adjectives than with positive ones. They are also, it has been argued, manifested in behaviour: studies have shown that those with anti-black implicit biases are less friendly to black experimenters and more likely to classify an ambiguous object as a gun when it’s associated with a black person and as harmless when it’s associated with a white person’ Jennifer Saul, <<http://www.biasproject.org/>>, accessed 10/07/15 2015.

When a modern day woman, often not a nun, makes claims of divine dialogue, the Roman Curia is already pre-determined to dismiss her testimony because she does not fulfil the profile of one who would likely be bestowed with the important divine gift of dialogue with God. Testimonial injustice occurs before the content of her testimony is even examined.

Even if a person passes this initial test, and there have been many Catholic nuns who came from the correct religious background, and who were not married and then divorced, such as Teresa of Avila, the CDF must then examine the content of these communications to assess whether they are doctrinally 'correct'. Not much has changed since Teresa's time when it comes to this element of the CDF's investigation of mystical testimony. Let us not forget that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith used to be called the Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition.

In theory doctrine is distinct from dogma in that doctrine is permeable and can be fluid. Doctrine is the teaching of the Church on matters of faith and morals, and stems from the interpretation of dogma. Dogma are the teachings laid down by God himself; divinely revealed and which the Church had formally declared as to be believed as revealed. The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes the distinction thus: 'The Church's Magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is, when it proposes truths contained in

divine Revelation or also when it proposes in a definitive way truths having a necessary connection with them' (Vatican 1992).

Dogma are truths Revealed (capital R), and doctrines are the teachings based upon those Revealed truths. When one claims to receive information and communication from the divine, one of the ways in which the CDF 'validates' this communication is through an assessment against current doctrine and dogma. If it is in alignment, the testimony may be validated, if it is not, it will stand no chance and the individual testifying will be abjected.

The case of Vassula Ryden nicely evidences this process of active abjection through epistemic injustice. She suffers a testimonial injustice because she does not fit the profile or mould of a 'divinely chosen' messenger. Despite this first failing, the CDF did not manage to silence her or her messages. This was in large part due to her vocal Catholic supporters, who number in the hundreds of thousands.

Claims of dialogue with Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are hugely controversial, but unless there is more than an individual claiming to have such dialogue, the Roman Curia will not engage with these claims. Indeed, it was not until 1995 after many requests from various priests, lay people, and supporters of Ryden that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the first *Notificatio* on Ryden's writings, which I include in full below:

Your Eminence,

Many bishops, priests, religious and lay people have sought an authoritative judgment from this Congregation on the activity of Mrs. Vassula Ryden, a Greek Orthodox residing in Switzerland, who in speech and in writing is spreading in Catholic circles throughout the world messages attributed to alleged heavenly revelations.

A calm, attentive examination of the entire question, undertaken by this Congregation in order to "test the spirits to see whether they are of The divine" (cf. 1 Jn 4:1), has brought out-in addition to positive aspects - a number of basic elements that must be considered negative in the light of Catholic doctrine.

In addition to pointing out the suspect nature of the ways in which these alleged revelations have occurred, it is necessary to underscore several doctrinal errors they contain.

Among other things, ambiguous language is used in speaking of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, to the point of confusing the specific names and functions of the Divine Persons. These alleged revelations predict an imminent period when the Antichrist will prevail in the Church. In millenarian style, it is prophesied that The divine is going to make a final glorious intervention which will initiate on earth, even before Christ's definitive coming, an era of peace and universal prosperity. Furthermore, the proximate arrival is foretold of a Church which would be a kind of pan-Christian community, contrary to Catholic doctrine.

The fact that the aforementioned errors no longer appear in Ryden's later writings is a sign that the alleged "heavenly messages" are merely the result of private meditations.

Moreover, by habitually sharing in the sacraments of the Catholic Church even though she is Greek Orthodox, Mrs. Ryden is causing considerable surprise in various circles of the Catholic Church. She appears to be putting herself above all ecclesiastical jurisdiction and every canonical norm, and in effect, is creating an ecumenical disorder that irritates many authorities, ministers and faithful of her own Church, as she puts herself outside the ecclesiastical discipline of the latter.

Given the negative effect of Vassula Ryden's activities, despite some positive aspects, this Congregation requests the intervention of the Bishops so that their faithful may be suitably informed and that no opportunity may be provided in their Dioceses for the dissemination of her ideas. Lastly, the Congregation invites all the faithful not to regard Mrs. Vassula Ryden's writings and speeches as supernatural and to preserve the purity of the faith that the Lord has entrusted to the Church.

Vatican City, 6 October 1995

Here we can see how the CDF were unsuccessful in discrediting Ryden's testimony in their first attempt at an intentional testimonial injustice. The support for this individual claiming dialogue with the divine was such that the CDF were forced to engage with the content of the writings themselves, despite their own standards implying that she was not a credible messenger.

The important things to draw out of this notificatio are as follows: (1) doctrinal errors are used as evidence that the communications are not genuine or divine. Apparently Ryden 'confused the specific names and functions of the divine persons'. The point the CDF's theologians are trying to make here is that if she were really speaking to the divine He would know His own name. (2) The notificatio claims that the content of the writings contradict taught Catholic doctrine; Ryden's writings call for some form of ecumenical pan-Christian community which is 'contrary to Catholic doctrine'. (3) No matter what Ryden does to make her writing more palatable, it is not enough to satisfy the CDF. After earlier discussion with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ryden no longer uses the 'incorrect' names for the divine in her later writings. But even this move to placate Vatican sensitivities surrounding language, is, according to the Congregation: 'a sign that the alleged "heavenly messages" are merely the result of private meditations.' Ryden's editing of her text – a process no different than the editing done by Saint Teresa of Avila posthumous Doctor of the Church to her own mystical testimony before submitting it to the Inquisitors – is what marks Ryden's text as fraudulent,

or, to use the more diplomatic, but no less damning term of the CDF ‘merely the result of private meditations’. Ryden’s writings are initially marked as invalid because they challenge Catholic doctrine, but when they stop challenging Catholic doctrine, this very fact is used as proof that they are simply fabricated.

A Legitimate Denial?

Some will defend the Roman Curia’s treatment of Ryden as legitimate and correct. As is inevitable with all online religious communities, a small section of the internet is devoted to criticizing and rebuking the claims of Vassula Ryden, and demonstrating how they are not only not divinely inspired, but are in fact demonic. One of the only people to actively engage with Ryden’s texts from in an academic manner is François-Marie Dermine, a Dominican priest who claims to also work as a diocesan exorcist. Dermine’s writings are useful in that they attempt to ‘unpack’ the CDF’s notification and explain how and why the Roman Curia engaged with her in the way in which it did.

His writings are also important because they offer another Catholic perspective; a different voice from the official Roman Curia’s and from the vocal and propagandistic voice of Ryden’s supporters. It must be remembered that ‘The Church’ is ultimately a community of individuals, and although I am concerned with the way in which the official authorities of the Roman Catholic Church engage

with Ryden (and other individuals that fall in my categories), it is vital to listen to other voices, equally less official 'Catholic' voices.

Although Dermine is a member of the Catholic Church, he has no official role in the discussion with Ryden. His writings are useful in aiding our understanding the variety of Catholic responses to Ryden's writings, and perhaps also useful in gaining insight into the Church's theological motivations in dialoguing with Ryden. But they are not the official Catholic response. Having said this, his involvement is comprehensive and offers a developed explanation for certain acts of the Roman Curia that may seem strange to anyone outside of the inner sanctum. With Dermine, we have an insider's view of the various decisions made by the Roman Curia in their public letters.

Dermine claims that one of the main reasons Ryden and her texts remain unable to 'obtain the approval' (Francoise-Marie Dermine) of the Church is because the Curia do not believe that the messages really are from God. He cites three reasons for this suspicion which rely on easily verifiable facts: First 'The disappearance of the messages received by Ms Ryden during the first 10 months of revelations, as well as the cancellation, censoring or modification of several of them. Such facts are probably the main reason that, in the most definite manner, contributes toward discrediting the revelations' (Francoise-Marie Dermine). It is indeed the case that the first 10 months of messages have never been published, and there are conflicting statements from Ryden and various supporters of her pertaining to their

whereabouts. Ryden herself claims to have burnt the messages, whereas her supporters claim she has them and will publish them soon. As it stands, they are unpublished and unknown.

Second, Dermine cites ‘The suspect nature of the ways in which these alleged revelations have occurred’ (words of the 1995 Vatican Notification), namely, as a result of automatic writing.’ Automatic writing is linked with the New Age; something Dermine (and the implication is, the Roman Curia) associates with the devil, never with God. He also cites ‘The ambiguous attitude of the protagonist toward the Church.’ And ‘The Vassula-centrism of the messages’ (Francoise-Marie Dermine). None of these objections are deniable, even if they may be challenged as not particularly important. Indeed the ‘ambiguous attitude’ of Ryden towards the Church is, I argue, something brought about by the epistemic injustice suffered by her, and as such ought to be dismissed as an illegitimate reason for her abjection. Finally, Dermine cites the ‘theological errors’ contained within the texts as reason for their dismissal. Again, this dismissal based on doctrinal errors is a manifestation of hermeneutic injustice, and as such offers no legitimate reason for abjection.

What Dermine’s engagement with Ryden’s writings does offer us however, is an insight into the wider implications Vassula Ryden’s claims have. According to Dermine, the Roman Curia ultimately will never accept or validate Ryden’s teachings because they believe her to be under the influence of the devil. She is not

simply ‘mistaken’, although he just stops short of explicitly claiming this, according to Dermine the strong implication is that she is possessed.

...it seems to me that the phenomenon placed under examination here would have a lot to share with mediumship in its New Age version of channeling. As Allan Kardec (1804-1869), the theoretician and popularizer of spiritism and mediumship in the West, said: «the medium [. . .] is the instrument of a foreign intelligence; he is passive, and what he says does not come from him» (*Le livre des médiums*, p. 2, c. 14, par. 172). I have no doubt whatsoever that our protagonist gets her messages from a «foreign intelligence». Just as I also entertain no doubts about its identity, strengthened by the admissions of Mrs. Ryden who recognizes that the devil has the ability to take over the phenomenon, using the same writing called “hieratic”, that is, holy, divine, inspired, to slip in errors or to add inappropriate words. [...] These are very disturbing and disarming admissions. How can you call holy and divine, a writing that can be used indiscriminately both by God and by the devil? (Francoise-Marie Dermine)

Moreover, Dermine’s writings confirm the presence of those elements of the Roman Curia’s criteria for judging an individual’s testimony as valid. Conformity to Church doctrine and the ‘seer’s credibility’ are both cited as ‘necessary positive elements’ ‘required’ for a ‘valid discernment’. It is because Ryden does not demonstrate a sound ‘background’ or indeed ‘sincerity, self-denial, humility and submission to the ecclesiastical authority’ that she is not a candidate for ecclesiastical approval. This only supports my argument that epistemic injustice is integral to the method and practice of the Roman Curia’s ‘discerning of the Spirit’ (Francoise-Marie Dermine).

Dermine’s criticism of Ryden and explanation for the Roman Curia’s treatment of her writings specifically cites her relationship to the Church: ‘Another reason that could explain the substantially negative attitude of the Congregation derives from

the fact that the protagonist seems to flutter over and above the Church, be it the Greek Orthodox Church or the Catholic Church'(Francois-Marie Dermine) This phrasing is reminiscent of the official document from the CDF, and the final two paragraphs where the author emphasizes how above anything else: 'She appears to be putting herself above all ecclesiastical jurisdiction and every canonical norm, and in effect, is creating an ecumenical disorder that irritates many authorities, ministers and faithful of her own Church, as she puts herself outside the ecclesiastical discipline of the latter (Ratzinger 1995).

The real issue here is Ryden's refusal to work within the rules of the Church. The church's purity needs to be protected from her influence. She needs to be expelled like a thorn. Unlike Hildegard, a member of the Church and therefore someone under the authority of the prelates, Vassula is not under any authority from Rome. But this does not mean they cannot define themselves in relation to her by expelling her. It simply means that they need to expel her in a different way. Hildegard's active abjection took the form of the interdict which pushed her to the margins of the Church, yet with Vassula the Roman Curia is forced to engage with her theologically, showing through 'reason' and theological argument how she is other to them. As it stands today, Vassula Ryden's writings are not in any way endorsed by the Catholic Church and '...it remains inappropriate for Catholics to take part in prayer groups established by Mrs Ryden. Concerning the question of ecumenical meetings, the faithful are to follow the norms of the Ecumenical Directory, of the Code of Canon Law (canons: 215; 223, ' 2 and 383, ' 3) and of Diocesan Ordinaries.'"

The question as to whether or not Ryden's writings are 'truly' dialogues with the divine may be interesting, but it is not important for my argument. Whether or not she is dialoguing with God or is instead under the influence of a demonic spirit is also irrelevant here. What is of interest and importance is the way in which the Roman Curia engages with her and the manner of their abjection of her. The case of Vassula Ryden shows us that individuals can be abjected by a religious community that they are not an official part of, it is just the case that the method of this abjection will be different. In the case of Ryden, she is abjected through an intersection of both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. This abjection helps the Roman Catholic Church define itself.

Chapter Five: Other Intersections

So far I have shown how each of the three categories of the actively abjected comprise a chronological model: the individual who understands herself to be in dialogue with the divine then takes action^A, understood in Arendt's sense, which in turn leads to her being abjected by her community. But in order to shore-up my argument I want here to explore the other intersections of my model: what happens when we have an individual who fulfils two of the three categories of the actively abjected? Why, in other words, are *all* three categories necessary and jointly sufficient for someone to be actively abjected?

The point I wish to illustrate through the examples I provide in this chapter is that without instantiating all three categories an individual does not occupy a strong enough position to create change. Only when all three categories are fulfilled do we find an individual with the strength of position necessary for liberation.

Moreover, by exploring the intersections of two of the three categories I will further illustrate the point I initially stated in Chapter Two; namely, it is crucial to my model that someone instantiates the various categories in causal order- one leads to the other which leads to the final abjection. If it were the case that anyone who fulfilled the three categories in any order whatsoever were the actively abjected we would have a lot of very un-liberating mystics. It is essential that an individual

progresses from believing they are having dialogue with the divine to this dialogue being the catalyst for taking action^A, and this action being the reason for being abjected.

The Holy Fool: Dialogue with the Divine intersecting with Abjection

Certain individuals claim dialogue with the divine and are abjected but do not take action^A. Perhaps the most obvious example of such individuals is that of solitary mystics, individuals who believe themselves to have dialogue with God but do not feel the need to take any action based upon this dialogue or information contained in the dialogue. Here I will give some examples of such individuals and show how they differ from simple ‘mad women’.

As we have briefly touched on in chapter two, the other group of people who may appear to fulfil both categories of (1) believing themselves to have dialogue with the divine and (3) being abjected, are those considered mentally ill. As I have written above, there is nothing stopping a ‘mad woman’ from being the actively abjected, but they would have to take political action^A as a result of their dialogue with the divine, and the response to that action^A by their community would have to be distinctively one of abjection. Dismissal or rejection is not the same as abjection, and we have seen that abjection is something quite distinct as an act. More often than not, ‘mad women’ who claim to speak to God are not abjected – they are

simply ignored or dismissed as having literally nothing to do with standard normative religious communities, or killed, or punished (that is, rejected, not abjected). For this reason, it is important to mark the distinction between those who may be considered a ‘Holy Fool’ and those who are just dismissed.

Those who claim to have dialogue with the divine but take no action^A are significantly more limited in their capacity to effect liberating change. No matter how clear and direct one’s dialogue with the divine may be, if one remains a solitary hermit taking no action at all, any liberation will remain merely personal. In this way, solitary hermit-like mystics can never fit the model of the actively abjected whose action^A is not only political, but necessarily communal. This links us back to the discussion of active versus passive mysticism from Chapter Three. Those who instantiate both categories of dialoguing with the divine and being abjected may be understood to practice a passive mysticism (if we understand active mysticism as that which initiates action in the world, as opposed to the Happoldian understanding which relates to how the mystical experience occurs (Happold 1963)).

Perhaps the perfect example of a passive mystic and ‘Holy Fool’ can be found in *The Mystic Fable*, (Certeau 1992). Here de Certeau describes the case of ‘The Idiot Woman’ from the Fourth Century. According to the tale cited from *Lausiac History*, there was woman living in a monastery ‘who pretended to be mad, possessed by a

demon' (Palladios in Certeau 1992: 32). This woman was brought to the attention of a saintly man by an angel:⁷⁸

The angel said to him: 'why do you have a good opinion of yourself? Because of your religious life and the place where you live? Do you want to see a woman more religious than yourself? Go to the monastery of the Tabenneist women and there you will find on with a scarf wrapped around her head. She is better than you. (Palladios in Certeau 1992: 33)

This woman 'better than' the holy man was the 'sponge of the monastery', she was 'beaten with bows, insulted, laden with curses, and treated with disgust' (Palladios in Certeau 1992: 32). She did not do anything to deserve this treatment other than behave differently to the others in the community. She:

...never turned her heart from God'; 'Of the four hundred [sisters], not one ever saw her chew anything during the years of her life; she never sat at table; she never broke bread with the others. She was happy with the crumbs she wiped up and the water from the pots and pans she scoured, without offending anyone, without murmuring, without speaking little or much' (Palladios in Certeau 1992: 32).

When the holy man arrives at the monastery he asks to see all of the women so that he may meet this woman more holy than himself. All of the nuns lined up to meet him at his request, 'But she did not show herself' (1992: 32). The holy man realised

⁷⁸ It is not insignificant that it was a saintly man (and not another woman) who was used by God to 'endorse' the holiness of the Idiot woman. This concurs with the part of Grace Jantzen's thesis that I agree with; women were disenfranchised from their own spiritual authority.

that one woman was missing when he could not identify the holy woman. When questioned, the nuns told him ‘We have an idiot [*salte*] within, in the kitchen’.

The idiot woman is dragged, kicking and screaming ‘by force’ to the Holy man. He falls at her feet and begs her to bless him. He berates the other nuns, ‘you are the ones who are idiots [*salai*], for she is for me and for you our mother [*Ammas*]’ (Palladios in Certeau 1992: 33). With this endorsement from a Holy Man, the nuns confess their sins against the abject woman. de Certeau himself notes her abject status, ‘A woman then. She doesn’t leave the kitchen. She doesn’t leave off *being* something that has to do with the crumbs and the leftovers with food. She makes her body from them. She maintains herself by being nothing but this abject point, the “nothing” that puts people off’ (Certeau 1992: 33).

The idiot woman fulfils two of the categories for the actively abjected: she has dialogue with the divine and she is abjected. The dialogue may not be verbal, but verbal communication is reserved in this story for the symbolic realm of the other nuns, the Holy man and the angel, as de Certeau points out – ‘the idiot is totally within the unsymbolizable thing that resists meaning’ (Certeau 1992: 34). But it is a dialogue. Her communication is in fact distinctly non-verbal. She goes through life ‘without murmuring, without speaking little or much’, but the dialogue she does have is with God and God alone; ‘she has never turned her heart from God’. It is this absolute envelopment within the realm of the unsymbolizable (Kristeva would call this the semiotic) that marks the idiot woman out as susceptible to abjection.

She is on the borders of her community, she is associated with repellent things that initiate disgust. It is also of note that this idiot woman does not speak or write; both things that would constitute action according to my model, and the Arendtian concept of action with its emphasis on speech and language.

The abjection of this woman is a product of her dialogue, but she takes no action^A. She takes no action^A in the way I conceptualise action using Arendt's model and for this reason she lives her entire life undiscovered as a mystic. The point at which she is forced to leave the realm of the semiotic, the realm of the unsymbolizable, forced to be seen for who and what she is, is the point at which she disappears, and ceases to be the abject. As the story continues, 'A few days later, unable to bear her sisters' esteem and admiration, overwhelmed by their demands for pardon, she left the convent. Where she went, where she hid herself, how she ended her days, no one has found out' (Palladios in Certeau 1992: 33). When she was pushed into taking some action^A, when the idiot woman was 'with force' thrust into becoming a confessor and absolver, she immediately stopped being abject. The idiot woman of Palladios' story cannot be the actively abjected because she is only able to fulfil two of the three categories at any one time. Her power was not one of liberation or political change.

Heretics: Action^A intersecting with Abjection

The second intersection I will explore here is of the individual who takes action^A and is abjected as a result. Within the confines of religious communities and Churches, such individuals have historically been labelled heretics, although of course not all heretics have intended to bring about liberation or positive change, and many have claimed divine dialogue. Those who claim dialogue with the divine, take action^A and are abjected become the actively abjected.

That ‘mystics and heretics both inhabit the margins of religious communities’ is not contentious, but the actively abjected is much more than a heretic even if her teachings may be considered heretical, or potentially heretical (Hornbeck II 2013: 89). Both mystics and heretics both ‘usually entail claims of access to knowledge unknown to or else condemned by religious authorities’ (Hornbeck II 2013: 89) and indeed the accusation of heresy is one made at those who challenge the magisterium’s ruling on anything. Even if they are not declared heretical it is a significant and harmful accusation for an individual to have to face, as we shall see in the example given below of a contemporary woman accused of heresy. What I hope to illustrate here is how the actively abjected holds significantly more power to challenge the authority of the Church than a straightforward heretic, because she

claims her authority from God herself,⁷⁹ the only source of power the Church cannot ignore.

Of course, those without such an authority but with the drive to make change in the Church, and who are punished for it, have existed since the very beginning of the institution. Arius is perhaps the best example of this. Arianism – the Christological position bearing his name (although promoted by others besides him) was explicitly used as an anti-doctrinal fulcrum against which official doctrine was defined (Ayres 2004).⁸⁰

The idea of communities defining themselves, both explicitly and implicitly, against that which they abject is not new. Perhaps the most archetypal example of this is the formation of the Nicene Creed which came about when Alexander intentionally defining the Church as it was in the fourth century, against the teachings of Arius. The Nicene Creed is still how Christians define themselves each time they attend the Eucharist. Yet the creed is not simply a statement of what Christians are, it is also a statement of what they are not. As Maurice Wiles describes it:

The creed has an explicit polemical thrust. There is nothing particularly surprising in that. The same could be said of much of the New Testament.

⁷⁹ Of course there is nothing stopping a heretic having this authority if they claim dialogue with the divine, take action^Δ, and are abjected, but then they become the actively abjected and not simply a heretic.

⁸⁰ Further discussion of this can be found in Rowan Williams, *Arius : Heresy and Tradition* (2nd ed. edn.; London: SCM, 2001). See also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy : An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Conflict with ‘the Pharisees’ or with ‘the Jews’ is a major determining characteristic of St Matthew's and of St John's gospels, and the polemical intentions of Galatians and of 1 John against Judaizing and gnosticizing Christians are unmistakable. (Wiles 1996: 2)

But the creed is not simply polemical, the *manner* of its polemical character is also significant. Through the careful choice of wording, the Nicene Creed (and its various forms and versions amended throughout the fourth century), polarised those who recited it against any form of Arianism, and later, against other heresies. The Catholic Church engaged with heretics in a specific way: it ‘defined itself over against them’ (Wiles 1996: 3).

Arianism claimed that because the Logos had a beginning, Jesus Christ as the Son could not be eternal. The implications of this were that the Son was not fully God in the way that The Father was. A famous icon depicting the council of Nicaea shows Arius lying subjugated underneath the members of the council.⁸¹ One might read this icon as showing how the Church is built upon the abjection of Arius – that it is through the abjection of Arianism that the Church after the Council of Nicaea was defined. Another reading might be that the icon shows how Arius himself is the foundation of the Church. I would argue that both are true. The abject is, after all, that which defines through being made a particular type of other.

Arius was not a mystic and claimed no dialogue with the divine. At least if he did, there is no evidence of this fact. It is always tricky to attempt to reconstruct the lives

⁸¹ See Appendix 1.

of the Church fathers particularly those accused of heresy, because their writings and even writings about them were often destroyed. Arius fits our model of the heretic here because even if he were in dialogue with the divine, and this dialogue were to influence his theological and political action (in the case of Arius, this political action was his theology), it is not known. He is not engaged with as someone who had dialogue with the divine, only someone who took action^A and was abjected.

Even before Arius, some of the other early Church Fathers such as Origen or Tertullian (whose theology was very influential to Arius' own) were considered heretics because their views were later (post Nicaea) in opposition to the official views of the Church. We can trace this tradition of defining by abjection all the way through the history of Christianity. Indeed, the Catholic Church as an institution was formed through the abjection of certain individuals and their theology. The Great Schism of the Church in the eleventh century led to the creation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. In this process not only were two distinct Churches formed, but the abjection of certain individual theologians allowed these separate Churches to define themselves against each other.

It is not news that 'Orthodoxy is constructed, in the processes of both theological and political conflict' (Williams and Chadwick 1989: ix), and there have always been individuals who were abjected in this conflict, just as there continue to be those abjected in these conflicts to maintain orthodoxy.

A more contemporary example of this intersection of action and abjection, is the Professor of Catholic Theology and practicing Catholic Tina Beattie. Beattie became the source of vocal controversy in 2012 when her invitation to be a visiting fellow and give public lectures at San Diego University, was rescinded by the Catholic institution. This invitation was withdrawn under pressure from the CDF. This pressure was applied to all Catholic institutions that had dealings with Beattie because she, along with 26 other theologians, clerics, and activists, had written and signed a letter to The Times newspaper about same sex marriage. In this letter, Beattie and her co-writers claimed that Catholics could ‘...using fully informed consciences ... support the legal extension of civil marriage to same-sex couples’ (2012).

It is important to note that Beattie and her co-signatories did not challenge the rulings of the Catholic Church directly. They simply supported a call to reassess this ruling. The action^A that Beattie took was to publically encourage a considered approach to same-sex marriage. It was significant because the letter she co-wrote and signed called for lay Catholics (as well as those with authority within the Church) to reassess doctrinal teachings. She was doing what a professional theologian should do, she was showing how it was theologically sound to support a certain movement regarding an issue currently being debated in the Church.

Up to this point the message from the magisterium had been univocal and unchallenged from within - with Beattie's signature on this letter she was not making a public proclamation of her own position, *as a theologian* she was encouraging other Catholics to assess the Church's official position about same sex marriage. But the letter, and Beattie herself, was treated by the CDF as if they were a direct challenge to the official teaching of the Church. As such, Beattie was intentionally isolated.

It is important to note, as Beattie herself writes in her official statement regarding the issue, that:

The letter did not commit any of the signatories to a position for or against same-sex civil marriage. Rather, it was putting across a reasoned argument as to why there are sound principles for Catholics in good conscience to take a number of different views on social policy issues such as same-sex marriage, even if these do not agree with the position stated by the hierarchy.

Beattie wrote that:

On Sunday morning (28th October) I received a letter by e-mail from Dr Mary Lyons, President of the USD, saying that she was rescinding the invitation because I 'dissent publicly' from the Church's moral teaching.' I do not know the exact reasons for the cancellation of my visit, but I have been the target of a blog campaign in recent weeks, which began with a concerted endeavour to have a lecture by me at Clifton Cathedral in Bristol cancelled. [...] The Bishop of Clifton, Bishop Declan Lang, resisted pressure to cancel the lecture but the protestors contacted the CDF, who intervened to say that the lecture should not go ahead. My cancelled talk in the Cathedral was on Mary and Lumen Gentium as part of a series on Vatican II, and had nothing to do with any controversial or disputed issue. [...]

Beattie was subject to an online smear campaign with a collection of catholic bloggers (including members of the priesthood as well as those under religious orders) calling for her to be personally investigated by the CDF.⁸²

This small but vocal collection of Catholics were successful in drawing attention to Beattie and all of her theological work. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith did indeed get involved – they directed the Bishop of Clifton to cancel Beattie’s lecture, and supported the University of San Diego in their decision to rescind their invitation to her.

In her statement published on her blog and cited by the mainstream press, Beattie writes that ‘As a result of my signing the letter, representations were made to Bishop Declan Lang of Clifton Diocese and to the CDF by various parties, which resulted in the cancellation – on the instructions of the CDF – of a lecture to be given by me at Clifton Cathedral, Bristol’ (Beattie 2012).

⁸²These same bloggers expressed shock at the claim, of course. See Nick Donnelly, 'Protect the Pope: The Tablet Thinks Catholic Blogs Are Responsible for Cdf Acting against Tina Beattie', <<http://protectthepope.com/?p=5725>>2015.

In an editorial in *The Tablet*, Catherine Pepinster wrote: ‘Nasty, unChristian remarks abound within the Catholic world. No wonder one Catholic journalist says he won’t read the most vicious sites of the Catholic blogosphere anymore: he views them as an occasion of sin. But what’s worrying is that Rome is apparently keen to read them too. The Vatican itself has become adept at using new media – check out Youtube, its tweets, its websites – realising the power of these twenty-first century opinion formers. The word is that Vatican officials are gleaned much of their knowledge of the Church beyond Rome from blogs, including those that have made spite their signature dish. [...] If we have reached a stage when Rome’s views are shaped by bloggers’ vitriol rather than the opinions of its nuncios and its bishops, let alone sounding out the people in the pews who pray and pay, then something deeply distorted is developing. It’s certainly no way for Rome to learn to talk human’ Catherine Pepinster, 'Letter from the Editor', *The Tablet*, 15/10/12 2012.

The Catholic Church as a whole, and the CDF in particular, acted to quickly and actively abject Beattie. She was not simply dismissed or punished by the magisterium, she was also used as that which members of her religious community should define themselves against. It is important here to emphasise that the Catholic Church is not a homogenous unit, but is a community bound together by the shared practise of certain rites and a shared belief in dogmatic truths. There is, however, a magisterium: those certain ordained individuals who have authority over other members of the Church. It was not just the CDF as the magisterium who punished Beattie, but the community itself, or at least a vocal and powerful part of that community who abjected her.

Comments published on one of the most vocal and active of the Catholic blogs in this issue, ‘Protect the Pope’, stated that:

Of course Prof. Beattie has the right as a Catholic to question and doubt such fundamental and sensitive doctrines of Faith, but only in private, seeking advice and guidance from her spiritual director, priest and bishop. But surely Prof. Beattie does not have the right as a Catholic to use her position as a professor at a Catholic foundation college to publicly disseminate dissent and disloyalty in the Church? But even more objectionable is Prof. Beattie voicing her dissent to young people under her care as a teacher (N. Donnelly, Rev. 2012b).

The objection this commentator makes is not only that Beattie disobeyed the Church’s teachings, but that she did so publically. The problem with such an attitude is that it fundamentally misunderstands what it is to be a professional

theologian. Those members of the Catholic community who vehemently objected to Beattie's support of an alternative view on the issue of same-sex marriage (and we must remember here that she did not *support* same-sex marriage she simply signed a letter that claimed it was possible, theologically, to support such marriage) mistook being a theologian for being a spokesperson for the Church.

This is of course a common mistake and one that Beattie herself points out in her own statement about the controversy, but as she rightly states there is a bigger issue here. It is one thing for a collection of uneducated lay Catholics to take umbrage at her action and accuse her of heresy. It is quite another for the theologians of the CDF to do the same. The CDF crossed a line when they used their authority to enforce the cancelation of Beattie's lecture on a completely unrelated topic.

This line separates engaged dialogue, dialogue that creates or informs doctrine, from dictatorial magisterial rule. When the CDF intervened to prevent Beattie speaking in public as a theologian, they did not engage with her in any level, let alone theologically. They silenced her. Moreover, the effect this silencing had was one of abjection. They defined the teachings of the Church *against* Beattie. Not against Beattie's position on same-sex marriage, but against Beattie as an individual.

The lecture that was cancelled had nothing to do with the debate regarding same-sex marriage ‘The lecture was part of a series ‘Opening the Windows of the Council for the Contemporary Church’. My talk was to be on chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*, and its title was ‘Mary: Mother of God and model of a pilgrim people’ (Beattie 2012). Had the lecture been on same-sex marriage, and the CDF insist that it be cancelled, it could be argued that they were acting to protect the Church from Beattie’s misrepresentation of official Catholic position on this issue. But that they forced the cancellation of a completely unrelated lecture means that the CDF were acting against Beattie herself. She, as an individual was made abject, and actively so. Beattie herself recognised this:

The cancellation of my visit is not the most important issue in all this. The real issues are academic freedom, the vocation of lay theologians in relation to the official magisterium, and the power of a hostile minority of bloggers (some of whom are ordained deacons and priests) to command the attention and support of the CDF. The latter is the most sinister development of all, and it is a cause for scandal which brings the Church into disrepute. However, it also shows how deep this crisis has become (Beattie 2012).

This action of the CDF is interesting in that it mirrors in many ways the way in which they engage with Vassula Ryden, but with some important differences. The difference between the treatments of the two women; both of whom challenge the magisterium’s official teaching on a certain subject, Ryden on Church Unity, Beattie on issues surrounding same-sex marriage, has to do with the authority claimed by these women. In the case of Ryden, her authority, like Hildegard or Catherine of Sienna, is divine. In this case the

CDF abject these women by challenging the validity or authenticity of their dialogue. They attempt to cut off their authority by challenging the very source of divine knowledge itself.

In the case of Tina Beattie whose authority is as a trained professional theologian, the CDF abject her by preventing her from doing her job. When they cancel lectures and put pressure on Catholic institutions to withdraw prestigious academic roles, they are stemming the flow of her authority. This is an intentional and planned action. They actively abjected Beattie just as the council of Nicaea actively abjected Arius.

The important point that both these examples show is that despite taking action^A and being abjected, these individuals had very limited effect. Their power to create change was restricted; they only fulfilled two of the three requirements to become Liberating Mystics, and as such demonstrate how and why all three categories are necessary for real liberating change. Had Tina Beattie had the added authority of having dialogue with the divine to support her challenge to the magisterium's position on same-sex marriage, she would not have been so easily dismissed. The irony is that those same Catholics behind the smear campaign against Beattie would very likely be those supporting her, had they believed that her objection to the Church's position on any issue was due to a direct message from God Himself. Her authority as

an academic theologian holds no sway compared to someone who claims to be speaking directly to God.

What we are seeing then, is that the actively abjected holds a very particular position within the Church and vis-à-vis the magisterium of the Church. The Roman Curia may not believe that Vassula Ryden, for example, is truly in communication with Jesus Christ, but they have to engage with her in a different manner to the way in which they engage with Tina Beattie precisely because they know that a large number of lay Catholics do believe she is in communication with Jesus Christ.

Religious Reformers: Dialogue with the Divine intersecting with Action^A

So what of those who believe themselves to be in dialogue with the divine and take action^A based upon it, but somehow manage to remain within the Church? As Bernard McGinn writes, ‘the theory of inevitable conflict between mysticism and institutional religion is challenged by the fact that so many of the key mystics in the history of Christianity have been pillars of the institution’ (2004: 200). The question then emerges: how and why are some individuals embraced by the magisterium and the Church as a community of individual believers, when others are spat out, and abjected?

The answer to this is multi-layered. First, it matters of course what the action^A is that is taken. Some actions^A are more contentious, dangerous, and bring about more change than others. Generally those who demand radical change from the Church as a community, or radically divert from the official message of the Roman Curia, will be in greater danger of abjection than those who simply want small changes in liturgy, or to set up a new religious order. Gersham Scholem argues that “All mysticism has two contradictory or complementary aspects: the one conservative, the other revolutionary”

(Scholem 1965: 7). Whilst I'm not sure I necessarily agree with Scholem,⁸³ it is correct to say that certainly all mysticisms have a more palatable element, an element that actively seeks to remain a part of the main body of the Church. It is not that this element is always intentionally at the forefront of the mystical practice, but sometimes it has had to be.

Most of the individuals I study in this thesis can be seen to take some active effort to make their teaching more palatable to the religious authorities of their time. Teresa famously re-wrote and heavily edited her *Vita* to ensure everything she wrote about was considered safe by the magisterium of the Inquisition. Although famously fearless and contrary, even Hildegard, in the early days of her writings, was keen to make sure that what she wrote was in alignment with doctrine.

It is this category of the intersection of these two particular categories of dialogue and action^A that we can see with even more clarity how the label of

⁸³ I would at least question whether those two elements Scholem identifies, are integral aspects of the mysticism or more (I think more accurately), reflective of the way in which mystics and mysticisms are engaged with and understood by mainstream religious authorities. In other words, that it is possible to see in all mysticisms both conservative and revolutionary elements may not be anything to do with the mysticism itself but the way in which religious authorities and mainstream churches understand the role and intention of mystics. If someone is actively looking for elements in a religious teaching that support their own religious teaching, they will either find those elements or else find the opposite. However if one approaches the study of mystical texts with the intention of discovering a new method of worship, whether or not this method of worship is in tension with the traditional teachings of a certain religion will not be the primary way in which this mysticism is understood.

the actively abjected is a dynamic one. This means that an individual can move in and out of being the actively abjected as their actions change and the way in which the Roman Curia (or the community that is doing the abjecting) engages with them, changes also.

Throughout my argument, I have attempted to show how the actively abjected is a label that can only be applied to those who fulfil all three of my categories, and how, therefore, due to the most common way in which abjection occurs (that it is something that is done, or occurs through agency) whether or not an individual fits all three categories will depend on a collection of variables that shift throughout time. One is not born actively abjected, one is made actively abjected, and this making not only has an order of manufacture (dialogue which leads to action^A which lead to abjection), but this manufacture only occurs when all three parts are in place.

Each of these parts of being the actively abjected are individually important and necessary to the final categorisation, but it is perhaps abjection which has the most impact on an individual's ability to effect *change*. One might argue that this makes little sense, that if an individual receives dialogue from the divine and takes action^A based upon that action and yet is not abjected by their community, they have the most ability to effect change. But this does not follow.

One must always remember that it is in the nature of all communities to define themselves by drawing boundaries. These boundaries may be more or less permeable, malleable, or shifting depending on the specific community, but the fact remains that boundaries define communities. How these boundaries are drawn, and importantly, how they are *maintained* is what we are concerned with here: my argument is that the individual who has the capacity to disrupt these boundaries, to stretch them, push them and ultimately rupture them, is the individual who actually effects change. This change can either be to change what counts as the community, or to change what the community does. A change made safely within the boundaries of a clearly defined community will not be of the same quality as a change which ruptures the boundaries of the community. Only the abject ruptures boundaries, only the abject ‘does not respect borders’ (Kristeva 1982).

When we have an individual who takes action^A based on their dialogue with the divine but is not abjected, they have not pushed the boundaries of the community, they have not effected liberation. Liberation according to my conception can only be achieved by breaking through the boundaries of the community, by freeing people from the enslavement of certain rulings, definitions, and restrictions. This can only be achieved by someone in a particular position, someone who, within religious communities, has the authority of God, who takes action^A based on this divine authority, and consequently who ruptures the boundaries of the community. In their very

Being, the abjected mystic threatens the stability of the community's identity.

When the mystic takes action^A and is abjected, they achieve rupture and radical liberation.

The dynamic nature of the actively abjected as category is vital. I will show how it is possible for an individual who fulfils all of the categories of the actively abjected at one point in their life, to move out of that category and fulfil only two of the categories. The point of this example is to show, again, how all three of the categories are necessary, as well as show how this dynamic works.

There are many examples of individuals who have dialogue with the divine, who take action^A based upon this and who are not abjected. To some extent, most if not all of the most famous mystics of the Church will fulfil these two categories at some point in their lives because the fact that they are endorsed mystics of the Church means that they are far from abject. Interestingly enough, despite what hagiographies of these individuals may claim, it is rare to find a mystic of the Church who was not at some point also the actively abjected. This is of course because whether or not one is abjected is based upon the community or individual doing the abjecting. This is particularly the case with active abjection. If a mystic has the approval or protection of the Pope, she will not be abjected. If she does not, she will. Popes do not remain

the same, and in the tenth and eleventh centuries, they changed and were replaced significantly more frequently than now.

What we see when we examine the way in which individuals are engaged with by the CDF, is that the position vis-à-vis the Church and the magisterium of the Church of those individuals who attempted to effect change, shifted depending not only on their own behaviour, but on who was in positions of power at the time.

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of an individual who moved between being protected and being abjected is Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard is the paradigmatic example of the actively abjected; she had dialogue with the divine, took action^A and was abjected. Moreover, her position as abject changed and shifted throughout her life. There are many times when she was safely protected from abjection by being in favour with the Pope at the time, despite writing letters that would otherwise threaten her safety.

Another example of an individual who fulfils two of the three categories but not always the third is Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc, like Hildegard, moved between abjection, celebration, back through to abjection which led to her murder and then finally resulted in her being heralded as a great Mystic of the Church and patron saint of France. But it was only at those points when she

was abjected – when she pushed against and ruptured the borders of the Community (in her case through insisting that she had access to knowledge from God) that she was the actively abjected. The liberation she facilitated occurred before and after her death, her murder was an important manifestation of her abjection but it was not necessary for her abjection. It is not the case that all actively abjected have to die for their cause.⁸⁴

Joan's impact and capacity to be the actively abjected did not end with her death, but with the appropriation of her narrative, her action^A, and her death by the Catholic Church and the French state. Joan, like Hildegard, was faced with extreme responses to her claims of communication with the divine. The first of these, her prophesy of a military reversal, made to the garrison commander Robert de Baudricourt, was accurate enough to gain his trust and belief in her connection to the divine (Pernoud et al. 1969: 35). From this point onwards, the messages Joan conveyed were heeded and she successfully predicted the victory over the English forces, encouraging and leading an offensive against the English in 1429. Because of the nature of the victory, and its almost impossible likeliness Joan was heralded as a divine messenger by the victorious Armagnacs.

⁸⁴ Perhaps the best and certainly more important book on Joan is Re Gine Pernoud, Edward Solomon Hyams, and Of Arc Saint Joan, *Joan of Arc by Herself and Her Witnesses*; Translated by Edward Hyams (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

It would be later, once captured by English-Burgundian forces and handed over to the English-sympathising Bishop of Beauvais, that she would be declared a heretic and burnt at the stake. The decision as to whether she was on the side of the God or the Devil depended entirely on which side the Catholic cleric in authority believed himself to be on. Unfortunately for Joan, the Bishop of Beauvais, Pierre Cauchon, was clear that the English had the divine right to rule, and found Joan's assistance to the Armagnacs evidence of her heresy.⁸⁵

Holy Fools, Heretics, and Religious Reformers

These examples demonstrate how the process of active abjection works. Active abjection is not something that occurs without agency or intention. For an individual to be actively abjected there needs to be a particular act or collection of acts performed by an individual or collection of individuals in a position of authority within a certain community. Abjection cannot be performed by someone on the fringe of a community; the abjector has to be someone from within the community of the abject, and the most effective abjector is someone with authority within the community. But active abjection from a religious institution or community can also only happen when an individual claims to have received dialogue with the divine. This is because without this particular form of authority, the potential abject does

⁸⁵ For an excellent and accessible, and scholarly discussion of the politics that shaped responses to Joan of Arc, see Helen Author Castor, *Joan of Arc : A History*.

not have the power to threaten the status quo of the religious community. Dialogue with the divine, and the authority that comes with this is essential to being actively abjected because only the direct word of God has the power to override the power of men.

The above claim about divine authority follows from the particular Christology of the contemporary Catholic Church. Christ, as it is taught since the Council of Nicaea, is wholly God, but he is also wholly man. It is the divine element of Christ that has authority over the human. Christians do not worship the human Jesus, they worship the divine Christ. Moreover, it is God's divine action that overrides the human actions of the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate after the crucifixion. It is divine action and only divine action that has the power to transform the crucifixion from something horrific and hopeless into something salvific and creating of hope.

Only those who claim the authority of the divine, those who claim to be in dialogue with and take the action desired by the divine, can effect real liberation. The actively abjected are effective in transforming religious communities because they harness this authority. Just as the resurrection and ascension ruptured the borders and boundaries of the religious community Jesus was a part of, the actively abjected rupture the status quo of their own religious communities. It is safe to say that the resurrection of Jesus was not a normal or anticipated event. Even the disciples of Jesus did not truly expect him to be physically and literally resurrected. It was not

the norm for members of the Jewish community, or indeed any religious or other community, to have their members resurrected or for them to ascend to heaven.

Jesus was the actively abjected at the time of his crucifixion and resurrection. Since Nicaea, where the narrative of the Crucifixion was settled and formulated in its detail, the divine authority of God has been integral to any radical change within the Catholic Church. It could be argued therefore, that the actively abjected could only exist in the form I describe here within the Catholic Church since the Council of Nicaea, because it was at this point that the divinity of Jesus was fully endorsed, and the story of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven was cemented. This narrative emphasized the ultimate authority of the divine and, moreover, emphasized the authority of the divine as that which created and defined religious community. It is the crucifixion (the ultimate abjection) due to the actions^A taken by an individual (Jesus) based on dialogue with God (even though Jesus is fully divine he was sent down by his Father, and takes the action he does after dialogue with Him), that disrupts the borders and boundaries of the religious community. It is this disruption that creates New Life. It is this disruption that liberates.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that there are a collection of individuals who occupy a specific and fundamental role within the Roman Catholic Church. Despite this role, and their central position in the life of the institution, their distinctness has not been subject to categorisation. My argument is an attempt to identify these people, most of them broadly labelled as mystics, and explain the position they hold, and why it is important.

We have neglected a significant aspect of the impact of purported mystics have on theology and the religious communities they occupy, as well as neglecting the specific ways these people have impact. This neglect arises partly because aspects of their actions do not fit into the confined moulds of either saint or heretic. Because of this, they have largely been ignored. Scholarship on mystics, particularly ‘problematic’ or ‘radical’ mystics (generally those who challenged the magisterium’s rulings or challenged ecclesiastical authority) has not managed to fully address the full humanity of these individuals. Mystics have had their rough edges smoothed; their battles sanitised; their voices silenced.

Although I am concerned with the way in which these figures are represented in the historical record, and I employ a hermeneutics of empowerment to their texts, my argument is not solely concerned with historical accuracy. I am more concerned with the way in which these texts are used today, and with the way in which their

agency has been manipulated and used, often by those who would seek to limit the agency of women, to perpetuate a sanitized ‘Catholic’ Christianity. This is because the way in which we understand the nature of these individuals as agents fundamentally shapes how we understand their legacy and the use of that legacy in the present day.

All of the individuals who occupy this specific position of actively abjected have three very important characteristics. The first, and the one that most often sees them labelled as a mystic, is that they claim a dialogue with God. It is this specific type of communication, dialogue that is responsive, which was the first of the three necessary conditions I identified that the actively abjected must satisfy. The second condition led on from the first: that the individual who engaged in dialogue with the divine took a particular form of action as a result of this dialogue. I appealed to the model of action found in Hannah Arendt’s formula of human activities, and argued that it is possible to understand the actions taken by those who claim dialogue with the divine as conforming to her conception of action (action^A). The third of the three categories that make up my model of the actively abjected, was that the individual who had dialogue with the divine and took action^A was then abjected as a consequence. Abjection being the Kristevan concept that describes one part of what happens when subjectivity is formed, a concept I have developed and extended more broadly.

There are examples of the actively abjected in all communities. Although my model depends upon a claim to dialogue with the divine, I think it is possible to extend this model to secular or non-religious communities. However, an appeal to a higher authority is an essential of any such modified view. In religious communities this higher authority is God, but in communities without this figure, any ‘transcendent’ other will do. It may be more difficult to find an authority that transcends all others in non-religious communities.

As I understand it, my argument improves upon the existing scholarship in several ways. But my original contributions in this thesis are not only to the scholarship on mysticism, but also to the scholarship on the way in which the Roman Catholic Church engages with those who appear to challenge the boundaries between doctrine and dogma. More widely still, my arguments will be of interest to those who examine how institutions define themselves through the treatment of individuals, and conversely, how the testimony, perhaps even the subjectivity, of individuals can be shaped by their institutional contexts. Evidently, my work also resonates with those writing in contemporary feminist and post-colonial literatures; scholars who may also be forging new hermeneutical strategies to empower the writings and agency of marginalized intellects.

Perhaps one of the most important distinctions I make in my argument is that between communication and dialogue. I argued in Chapter Two that this distinction is not only philosophically important, but has wider implications for how we

understand the texts of these purported mystics. I made the case that dialogue requires two active agents to be actively engaging with each other, in a reciprocally understood way, unlike communication which only need involve one agent. Then, through a close reading of several primary texts, I showed how a variety of women mystics demonstrate a dialogue with the divine. Not only that, I suggested that these dynamics appeared to have an abusive structure, akin to that non-mystic relationship between women and their abusers in modern heteronormative romantic relationships.

Part of making this argument was a desire to read the texts written by these women as honestly and directly as possible, despite their temporal distance and the extent to which their texts can be obscured by a collection of ideologically-driven readings. Ricoeur talks about a hermeneutics of suspicion as an important philosophical practice when reading a text, and such readings are important (Ricoeur 1965). But it is equally important to read texts that have been relied upon to shore-up oppressive ways of relating to the divine, and oppressive gender constructions, with a hermeneutics of empowerment. We have to intentionally resist a dichotomy of ‘passive’ vs. ‘active’ when approaching the texts of women mystics (or indeed any oppressed party). It is simply not accurate to understand these texts as either evidencing a complete lack of agency or control, or else demonstrating a fully power-driven motive in their writing. Much of my efforts in this thesis have been directed at complicating this binary, much like the binary of heretic or saint

that these same women were forced into. In turn I have resisted accentuating the epistemic injustices meted out to mystical texts and women mystics as agents.

This thesis, then, is my attempt to add nuance to the ways of thinking about, reading, and working with the texts of women understood to be mystics. In identifying and arguing for a third category, outside of the binary of accepted and rejected (or saint/sinner), I have intended to blur the boundaries of received thinking about these concepts, the maintenance of which only results in epistemic injustice. I have argued that it is important to engage seriously with the specific language chosen by the women who wrote these texts, and credit them with the sophistication of understanding their own experiences. This is lacking in much scholarship in this area.

One example of such seriousness is found in my second chapter. In a letter Hildegard wrote to Bernard of Clairvaux, she used the Latin word *proferre*, saying that her tongue was unable to express the marvels that she had seen. In Latin, there are two terms that roughly translate to the word for ‘express’; *proferre*, the word chosen by Hildegard, and *decere*. This second word means specifically ‘to say’. Hildegard chose her words carefully, and we should be attentive to this fact. It is important to mark this subtle but important choice of language not because it sheds light on just how sophisticated Hildegard’s vocabulary was, but because it shows her understanding of the nature of her experiences: the marvels that she was shown, the experiences she has had, were ineffable.

This important point, regarding the extent of the agency and understanding of these women authors, fed into another of my arguments: that we need to take seriously the way in which the authors of these texts understood their relationship with the divine, and examine what it tells us about the God they worshipped, and the socio-cultural environment in which they were taught to understand and love such a God. Whether we like it or not, what we see when we examine the texts of those considered Mystics of The Church, such as Teresa of Avila, or Hildegard of Bingen, is textual evidence of a fundamentally abusive relationship with God.

Now, one can argue, as I have, that this apparently dysfunctional and abusive dynamic is a product of the patriarchal culture and Church of the eleventh or sixteenth centuries (respectively) in which these women lived. However this approach does not detract from the fact that these texts (1.) betray an abusive dynamic between the Christian God and these women, and even more importantly, (2.) that these same texts which have been used for hundreds of years, are still used today as inspirational and devotional texts to teach Christians, particularly women, how to be ‘good Christians’.

When I first identified that there was a very particular way in which certain women mystics were being treated by the Roman Curia, it was my supervisor Pamela Anderson who suggested I read *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Kristeva 1980). In Kristeva’s concept of the abject I found a description of the material – for want of

a much better word – that these women were being treated as. But I was most interested by the process of abjection itself, a process according to Kristeva (following Klein) that an individual goes through in order to become a subject. Kristeva has written much on abjection as a process an individual does or goes through unconsciously. Yet no one, as far as I could find, had written on abjection as active and intentional, or as abjection as a process performed by institutions or communities. What I realised was that the mystic was not only often the abject of religious or theological communities, but that these same communities were actively and intentionally abjecting her. I hope this contribution can be taken further, and be subject to future development and study. The concept is ripe for application to the functioning of other religious groups as well as those people marginalised by white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy, such as trans* women of colour and non-binary people.

I found overwhelming evidence, in the letters between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the contemporary living mystic Vassula Ryden, for the active and intentional expelling of certain individuals from the Roman Catholic Church. In the correspondence made public by Ryden, I was able to see a systematic and concerted effort by the CDF to define themselves against that which they claimed Ryden was, or was claiming to be. This process of active abjection reminded me strongly of the letters that Hildegard of Bingen received from the Prelates at Mainz. I was able to show how the way in which people who claim to

be in dialogue with the divine and take a particular type of (Arendtian) action had hardly changed at all, over the course of eight hundred years.

Although the Congregation for the Doctrine of the faith appears to be a department that deals with black and white issues, one might think someone is either a saint or they are not, in fact, almost all of their work occupies the murky theological and philosophical area between this binary. And what goes on now has not changed very much, from what went on in the eleventh century.

These points matter for a collection of reasons. It matters how we understand and use the texts of oppressed peoples because the continued disenfranchisement of the authors of the texts maintains the oppression and disenfranchisement of oppressed people living today. It makes a difference whether we read the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, a woman who describes a violent and abusive relationship with a male God, as a manual on how to be ‘a woman’, or as a cautionary tale against the power of patriarchal supremacy and insight into the extent to which certain theologies impact women’s self-identity.

It also matters that we come to recognise, and then understand, the impact had by those who occupy the role of the actively abjected on the maintenance and self-definition of the Roman Catholic Church. There would be no Church without these individuals blurring the boundaries between God and His people. And it also matters how we understand the difficult and descriptively evasive role played by

abjected individuals. Abjection, if we follow the thinking of Kristeva and Klein, is something that we do to others all the time, and that others do to us. It is when this abjection becomes active and intentional that oppression occurs. If we desire an end of oppression, we need to identify the actively abjected and those who abject them.

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Appendix One

