

Walter Hilton and the Development of Practical Spiritual Theology


By: Kevin Patrick Goodrich

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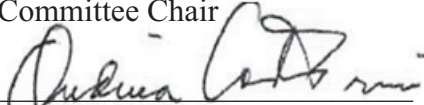
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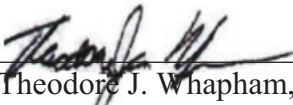
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Abstract

This dissertation explores a synthesis between practical theology and spiritual theology for the purpose of retrieving the wisdom of past mystics for the spiritual lives of Christians today. This approach to theology is described in this work as Practical Spiritual Theology. The 14th century mystic, Walter Hilton, is used as a case study in the development of this theological approach. Thomas Groome's Shared Christian Praxis is utilized as a conversation partner and methodological resource for the development of potential new spiritual theologies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the historic lands of Hilton in Nottinghamshire, England, United Kingdom.

Keywords: spiritual lives, Walter Hilton, Shared Christian Praxis

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CHAPTER ONE. FOUNDATIONS OF PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

Retrieval as Inherent to the Christian Project and Christian Spirituality

Christianity claims that the historical is persuasive.¹ The faith meant to be lived today is rooted in the experience of the people of Israel, the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ, and in the witness of those who have followed Christ over the centuries. To be a Christian is to inherit a historical tradition, one that is living and continues to make claims upon the believer in the present. It is impossible to speak of either Christian spirituality or Christian living without referring to the past. This requires more than a passing reference. It necessitates a retrieval of the past for the purposes of the present, and broadly engaging the mystics and teachers of the Christian spiritual life through the centuries. This includes engagement with the English medieval mystic, Walter Hilton.

David Buschart and Kent Eilers use the term *retrieval* in the sense of “a mode or style of theological discernment that looks back in order to move forward.”² This echoes the Second Vatican Council’s call to “return to the sources.”³ It also includes what John Webster describes as “an attitude of mind”⁴ through which the “resources from the past are found distinctly advantageous for the present situation.”⁵ When contemplating the Christian mystics, including Walter Hilton, their writings comprise the primary entry point into their life and teachings. This concern with the written text is essential to the

¹ “Christianity, including its theology, is always looking back in order to move forward.” David Buschart and Kent Eilers, “Introduction,” in *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), introduction, Kindle.

² Buschart and Eilers, introduction, Kindle.

³ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello, 1975). In keeping with citation convention regarding church documents, this will be cited hereafter as *LG*.

⁴ John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 584.

⁵ Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” 584.

Christian life as manifested in Christianity's canonical traditions. Such traditions look to the Old and New Testaments as the primary sources of the deposit of faith,⁶ the content of the Gospel,⁷ and the revelation of God.⁸ These texts shape and support, in varying degrees, all expressions of Christianity spirituality.

Mystical writers do not supplant the scriptures. Instead, they witness to the veracity of scripture's claims, especially when it comes to the experience of God and in offering guidance for living a life that flows from this experience. They are witnesses, like a bonfire on a dark winter's night, to the reality of God. In the history of the Church, they have often been given an authoritative status as witnesses to God and to the spiritual life. An authority conferred by holiness. Thus they witness in many senses, including that given by scripture. The author of Hebrews states, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."⁹ The concern of Christian mystical writers is the life of faith and one's encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. Their writings are classics, as they are an abiding fixture in Christian literature¹⁰ and offer an abundance of

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (St. Paul: Fortress Press, 1992), 148. Rahner states, "What the church has once taken possession of as a portion of the revelation which has fallen to its share, as the object of its unconditional faith, is from then on its permanently valid possession. No doctrinal development could be merely the reflection of a general history of humanity . . . Yet, all human statements, even those in which faith expresses God's saving truths, are finite."

⁷ For a discussion on the content of the Gospel, the meaning of its symbols and texts, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁸ Like Rahner and Tracy, the theologian Richard Niebuhr acknowledges the givenness of revelation, but also its limits in being expressed within time by human beings. For more on this see Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster, 2006), 25-31.

⁹ Hebrews 12:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version). All scripture from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ The next chapter will highlight Hilton's steady, though not showy, place in literature on English mysticism.

meaning for the living the faith from the past to the present.¹¹ This work explores whether classic texts, such as the writings of Walter Hilton, still have something to offer Christians today.¹²

The words *spiritual* and *spirituality* are often used in inexact ways. Typical of religion, defining spirituality can be quite elusive. Spirituality is often described as a short-hand reference for numinous experiences or those embodied values that guide one's life.¹³ Sometimes spirituality is contrasted with religion, the first being conceived as a broader term of meaning- making and practice for individuals and the latter referring to the doctrines and institutions associated with organized religious groups.¹⁴ While spiritualities of all kinds exist, this work focuses specifically on Christian spirituality. For some, the term *Christian spirituality* may even replace the term *mysticism*.¹⁵ For others, Christian spirituality has a wider range of meanings, encompassing both the mystical experience and the entire experience of the Christian life.¹⁶ This broader understanding offers more possibilities for nuance and greater theological clarity. Though mystical writers, including Walter Hilton, are often concerned with fostering divine encounter and

¹¹ David Tracy. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 2013), 154.

¹² Classic texts have the potential to unjustly privilege certain voices while silencing others. In this work, Hilton's writing are contextualized and critically engaged to mitigate some of these dangers.

¹³ Bradley Nassif et al., *Four Views on Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 12.

¹⁴ Religion and spirituality are not always tied together, not in formal terms. Spirituality manifesting as an alternative option to traditional religion is a reality. For more on this see Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes. Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York, Oxford, 2014).

¹⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 5-6.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark Barrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, John Hopkins, 2005), xiii.

experience, their recommendations are often directed more broadly to the lives of their readers. For example, Hilton advises a man to attend to his business and to his prayers.¹⁷

The study of the spiritual life traditionally occurs through the discipline of theology within the church and the academy. In recent decades, however, a new academic discipline, *Christian Spirituality*, has emerged within academic theology.¹⁸ This field is interdisciplinary, with scholars from many disciplines examining the lived experiences of those seeking life in Christ. These multi-perspectival approaches are extremely helpful, enriching both academic and pastoral reflection on the subject. While there are many ways of conceiving this discipline, most do not have explicitly pastoral ends. Thus, “spirituality as a discipline does not seek to deduce from revelation what Christian spirituality must be, or to prescribe theologically its shape, character, or functioning, or even necessarily to promote pastorally its exercise.”¹⁹ This work intends to bridge the academic with the pastoral. Walter Hilton, as well as many other writers on the spiritual life, wrote with the intention of fostering and encouraging people to live their faith as fully as possible. Their work was explicitly theological, even as it was clearly directed to the pastoral realities of specific cultures and times. This theological primacy suggests that any examination of Hilton, including efforts to interpret his writings for today, must also be overtly theological in nature, “Faith in God is the direct object...while God in and through faith compromises the indirect object and hence the aim of...any kind of theological research whatsoever.”²⁰

¹⁷ David Jeffery, ed., *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsel of Walter Hilton* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1985), 16.

¹⁸ Dreyer and Barrows, *Minding the Spirit*, 7.

¹⁹ Dreyer and Barrows, 6.

²⁰ Johannes van der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1998), 119.

Spiritual Theology

In contrast to the newer academic discipline of Christian Spirituality, the older discipline of spiritual theology is concerned with pastoral ends. Jordan Aumann notes that “Spiritual theology is that part of theology that, proceeding from the truths of divine revelation and the religious experience of individual persons, defines the nature of the supernatural life, formulates directives for its growth and development, and explains the process by which souls advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to its perfection.”²¹ The writings of Walter Hilton, and many other mystics, are classic examples of spiritual theology. For example, Hilton’s chief aim is to encourage his readers at the beginning of the spiritual life, help them move toward the more advanced steps, and ultimately experience union with God.²² Perfection in the spiritual life was understood as union with God.

Simon Chan defines spiritual theology in a related way. He states, “Spiritual theology seeks to understand spiritual growth from beginning to end, making use of biblical and experiential data.”²³ Chan describes systematic theology as an exploration of

²¹ Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 22.

²² Providing direction to individual Christians expressively for the purpose of guiding their spiritual development has a long tradition of practice within the Church. For example, see George Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Hilton and other medieval mystics embraced direction as a regular part of their vocation, providing direction and through the writing of letters and treatises on the spiritual life. This has cognates with the modern spiritual direction movement, but also contrasts. For more on modern spiritual direction see Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending the Soul* (New York, Paulist Press, 2001). Of significance contrast is that ancient and medieval directors were more directive in their counsel than modern directors, who are often influenced by therapeutic models of non-directive counseling and care. For most of Christian history, certainly in in Hilton’s time, directors did not undergo professional training and recognition in the manner of the modern spiritual director movement; rather, they became involved in this ministry because of their reputation for Christian maturity, as well as their record of effectively and pastorally guiding souls. Both professional and pastoral models of spiritual direction operate today. For further discussion of these issues see Peter Ball, *Anglican Spiritual Direction* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007).

²³ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998), 18.

the rational concepts of Christian experience, while spiritual theology explores the experience behind those formulations.²⁴ In practice, it might be the difference between reading an essay on the theoretical aspects of building a fire and a how-to essay on building a fire. Some divide spiritual theology into two subdisciplines, *ascetical theology* and *mystical theology*. Ascetical theology is concerned with growth in Christian virtues and living, whereas mystical theology is concerned with the specifics of the mystical experience and union with God. Some use these terms interchangeably.²⁵ For example, Hilton writes with both ascetical and mystical concerns.

Martin Thornton has a more expansive view of ascetical theology, defining it as “a practical and synthetic approach to all other branches of theology.”²⁶ This more holistic view of spiritual or ascetical theology reflects the more integrated nature of theology in Hilton’s time before the advent of the modern academy, resulting in the numerous specializations and subdisciplines of theology.²⁷ Theology in the early centuries of the Church was used to mean “the true, mystical knowledge of the one God.”²⁸ Theology was ecclesial centered in the life of the Christian community. In the Middle Ages theology developed into a science in the “scholastic sense of a method of demonstrating conclusions.”²⁹ In addition, in the early and medieval periods theology was conceived of essentially as an exposition and study of Holy Scripture from which truths and principles would be derived and then applied. While early forms of the

²⁴ Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 16.

²⁵ Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 28.

²⁶ Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 17.

²⁷ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 34-44.

²⁸ Farley, *Theologia*, 33.

²⁹ Farley, 34.

university developed in the Middle Ages theology was still, largely, centered in the life of the Church. Furthermore, while some laymen studied theology in the middle ages, it remained chiefly a practice and profession of clerics. This clerical paradigm would later be questioned as adequate for doing theology in the modern world. However, the practice and training of clergy remains an important aspect of contemporary practical theology.

Practical Theology

There are those that describe practical theology as a theological discipline encompassing the traditional arts of ministry as well as a broader academic discipline exploring the relationship between experience and faith.³⁰ The modern origin of practical theology is often traced to Friedrich Schleiermacher, a protestant pastor and liberal theologian of the early nineteenth century. Schleiermacher was keen to secure – in keeping with the spirit of the age- theology’s place in the modern academy by defending its identity as a “positive science.”³¹ This involved a major shift from focusing on the experience of religious individuals and setting aside – or at least questioning skeptically – the confessional and revelatory truths of Christianity in an effort to explore faith from a more rationalistic perspective. This perspective is embodied by the words of David Tracy, “the need to develop...theology---available, in principle, to all intelligent, reasonable, and responsible persons.”³²

³⁰ This definition has been used within the Ph.D. program in practical theology at St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, Florida. I define practical theology as “Reflection on human experience, in light of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, done in partnership with other academic disciplines, which leads to wisdom and transforming action.”

³¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), xv. See also Farley, *Theologia*, 33.

³² David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (University of Chicago Press, 1975) xiii.

Much of traditional theology begins with the revealed truths of faith before moving to human experience.³³ Practical theology begins with human experience and then moves to the revealed truths of faith. In practice, all theory or theological construct have some basis in experience (even if it has been rarified for centuries) and every action or experience is theory laden.³⁴ However, practical theology's method of beginning with experience is a critical distinction that separates it from more speculative theological disciplines.

Practical theology orients one toward specific situations and contexts. Its purpose is not creating and applying universal systems of theology, thus "the aim of theology is not to work out a system that is enduring so much as to meet every day experiences with faith – and to express that faith in terms of everyday experience. Theology is an ongoing process."³⁵ Pastorally theology, sometimes narrowly focus on the work of the pastor and sometimes broadly focused on the life of congregations, is sometimes, also understood to include topics related to the spiritual life and spiritual direction. This is because of the traditional role of priests and pastors as spiritual guides. Pastoral theology is one subdiscipline of practical theology—at least in the study of its practice. Sometimes, in the British context, for example, the term pastoral theology and practical theology are used synonymously.³⁶ What is crucial to understand about practical theology is its orientation toward experience and practice as being the first steps of theological reflection.

³³ Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 5.

³⁴ "Nearly all practical theologians today agree that there is no straight line from theory to practice" Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon Mikoski, eds. *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2014), 2.

³⁵ Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, 49.

³⁶ Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 1-12. This understanding of practical or pastoral theology, while dominant in many circles, contrasts with other understandings of pastoral theology which seek to recapture a Christocentric and ecclesiological centered pastoral theology. See Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A*

Practical Theology is often identified for its appropriation of the social sciences in doing theology (both in methods and methodology). The starting point of experience requires a “thick description” of the social and this requires engagement with those academic disciplines dedicated to this descriptive and analytic work. Practical Theologians are not social scientists, but they utilize the social sciences and indeed any academic discipline (to include the humanities and natural sciences) that may enhance and assist their theological work. This willingness to partner with other academic disciplines gives Practical Theology an unusual amount of suppleness in approaching and theologizing about any topic, experience, or community. It is necessary for practical theologians to theologically critique their conversation partners from other disciplines so as not to naively adopt these other disciplines philosophical assumptions which may at times be in conflict with certain theological convictions. The inverse of this is also true as stated by Clodovis Boff, “Theology must be able to uncover the properly ‘christic’ signification even where it is ideologically denied, as in certain historical movements in the practice of certain non-Christians.”³⁷

If one is to retrieve the writings and teachings of Walter Hilton and other mystics for the benefit of those living today, then they must enter the experience and practice of today’s believers. As part of its commitment to doing theology from below, practical theology often makes use of partner disciplines, especially from the social sciences. This includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods.³⁸ These methods, especially

Christological Foundation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004). This dissertation engages with both understandings of pastoral theology, the latter understanding correlating with the aims spiritual theology.

³⁷ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 33.

³⁸ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 80.

the qualitative, will be useful in exploring how contemporary Christians respond to mystics like Hilton. Practical theology helps with this process, especially in the use one of practical theology's subdisciplines, *Christian education*, also known as *Christian formation*.³⁹ The word formation has replaced education in some circles to emphasize the holistic nature of faith formation, especially in increasing secular societies.⁴⁰ The works of Thomas Groome serve as a major conversation partner, as his research and writing give attention to issues of pedagogy, learning, and formation. Reflecting on the presentation of Hilton and other mystical writers to contemporary Christians, and for what ends, is an important part of *Practical Spiritual Theology*.

Practical Spiritual Theology

It may be helpful to understand spiritual theology using practical theological terms.⁴¹ For example, spiritual theology draws upon the experience of Christians seeking union with God. In this light, one might conceive of spiritual theology as a type of normative and confessional practical theology. Much of practical theology is more descriptive than prescriptive, while also more suggestive than normative.⁴² Spiritual theology tends to be a prescriptive discipline that presents norms for the spiritual life. Like practical theology, it is also possible to think of local spiritual theologies as offering conclusions directed at a specific context and only tentatively suggested for wider audiences. The correlation method between Christian truth and lived experience may be

³⁹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 299. The term formation is particularly appropriate in discussions of spiritual theology and the concerns of writers like Hilton who understood the goals of the spiritual life to be transformational.

⁴⁰ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), x.

⁴¹ This possibility presents itself in the definition of spiritual theology given earlier by Simon Chan, specifically, "Spiritual theology seeks to understand spiritual growth from beginning to end, making use of biblical and *experiential* data." Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 18. Emphasis mine

⁴² Cahalan and Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical*, 4.

utilized more broadly to create brand new spiritual theologies.⁴³ However, it is the contention of this work that building upon the classics of spiritual theology, like Walter Hilton, will be a more fruitful and effective approach. To disregard spiritual theology is to dismiss the wisdom, practice, and religious experience of Christians across the centuries. Furthermore, to disregard spiritual theology may be to disregard God. If mystics like Hilton and others have encountered God or helped others to encounter God, to disregard spiritual theology is at the least to disregard the testimony of those who have encountered God.

The goal of practical spiritual theology is to do spiritual theology by using the writings of a specific mystic or spiritual teacher in conversation with the experiences of contemporary believers. In this way, the emphasis on studying human experience and faith in partnership with the social sciences from practical theology joins together with the wisdom of experience found in spiritual theology throughout history. Also, the interior life, being the focus of the contemplative life, is critically relevant to a theology of action—a prime concern of practical theology. A focus on the contemplative life and being is an important corrective to church and society’s usual focus on the active life and doing. Further, without God as the central goal of the spiritual life, it and its associated practices become means to various good ends such as better living, social justice, and flourishing congregations. However, this is an inversion of a central claim of the Christian tradition as embodied by Hilton, namely that the pursuit of God for God’s sake is the goal of the Christian faith.⁴⁴ This pursuit may involve improved living, spiritual

⁴³ This possibility will be explored in later chapters of this dissertation, especially in the last chapter in its consideration of the opportunities and limitations of Practical Spiritual Theology.

⁴⁴ Diogenes Allen writes, “What is the goal of the spiritual life? This goal has been described in various ways—as the vision of God, the vision of the Trinity, union with God, participation in God’s life

practices, and the pursuit of social justice. However, one pursues these in the ultimate pursuit of God or in response to an encounter with God. Thus, God becomes the end and not the means of the spiritual life.

Walter Hilton

One way of doing practical spiritual theology would be to do an extensive study of the mystics and spiritual theologians across the centuries. Such a study would include creating a synthesis of their principles and direction for the spiritual life and bringing this synthesis into conversation with the experience of contemporary believers. This could be a fruitful approach and the voluminous work of a scholar like Bernard McGinn could even make such a project feasible.⁴⁵ Practical spiritual theology offers a means of retrieving and reviving the writings and teachings of specific mystics for the benefit for those seeking to live the spiritual life today. The advantage of this approach over a larger synthesis is that it takes each voice seriously in its own right, allowing contemporary Christians to relationally encounter another human being as a fellow witness to the faith, rather than simply following a set of abstracted principles. Furthermore, practical theology is oriented toward the particular, helping one to focus on specific contexts versus creating theological systems that attempt to universalize.

Hilton is an ideal subject for the development of practical spiritual theology because his teachings reflect a systematic concern for the spiritual life while being

and being, the pure love of God, and the condition of knowing and enjoying God forever.” Diogenes Allen. *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 23. Simon Chan writes, “The Christian life is an intentional process aimed at a goal that is various called union with God (Catholic), deification (Orthodox) and glorification (Protestant).” Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 18.

⁴⁵ See McGinn’s series, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Of particular interest for this work is Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism: 1350-1550* (New York: Crossroad, 2012), 331-470.

directed toward specific kinds of readers. Hilton's work has been described as a "summa of the spiritual life" because of its comprehensive character and because his teaching builds upon the spiritual theology from the past centuries up to his own time.⁴⁶ In this way, one could describe Hilton as a nascent practical spiritual theologian insofar as he brings the historical witness and insight of spiritual theology into conversation with the experience of Christians of his own time.

Hilton did not engage in a formal qualitative study in his ministry of writing and spiritual direction. Indeed, such methods were unavailable to him or any of the other potential mystics. However, Hilton like spiritual directors before him and following, did engage in qualitative study in an informal sense, reflecting on his own experience and the experience of those he worked with to gain insight and offer better counsel. This sort of careful praxis can be combined with formal qualitative study as means of extending his wisdom today, which is a central goal of practical spiritual theology. It is this use of empirical methods with traditional spiritual theology that helps to define Practical Spiritual Theology.

Authoritative Experience: Why Listen to Mystics?

Spiritual theology is often conceived as beginning with the dogmatic and doctrinal teachings of the Church. Practical theology begins with experience and moves to the dogmatic and doctrinal teachings of the Church. Both spiritual theology and practical theology commend practice. Broadly, authority is derived from doctrine in spiritual theology, whereas authority is derived from experience in practical theology. This is simplistic, but helps to show the spectrum of how authority, witness, and voice are

⁴⁶ Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1986), 176-177.

recognized within the life of the Church. Practical Spiritual Theology recognizes that in the history of the Church the experience and practice of mystics and saints has been given a certain authority. This authority was often, but not always, complimentary to the teaching authority of the Church. One of the purposes of religious practice, within the Christian Tradition, is the development of holiness. Holiness in the spiritual life as conceived by Hilton is characterized by living a life of virtue and union with God.

Holiness is most often associated with mystics, as well as certain exemplary individuals, often referred to, and sometimes canonized, as saints. While there is the more common understanding of all believers being saints in Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ The New Testament also holds up certain individuals as exemplary in a way that provides Biblical warrant for saints as exceptional individuals.⁴⁸ These saints in turn are lauded as exceptional witnesses to the faith. It is for this reason and others that spiritual writers like Walter Hilton deserve a hearing from contemporary Christians.

The concept of holiness in the Bible finds its original roots in the Old Testament, where the conception of holiness is understood as a setting apart.⁴⁹ The people of Israel were differentiated from their neighbors by the observance of certain ritual and moral commandments. This holiness – being set apart- by the people of Israel, is understood as reflecting the holiness of God, “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.”⁵⁰ This was a communal holiness, by which the people of God reflected the holiness of God. Holiness was the

⁴⁷ Acts 9:32, 1 Corinthians 1:2

⁴⁸ Hebrews 11

⁴⁹ Andrew Hill and John Walton, ed. *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 132-133.

⁵⁰ Leviticus 20:26

focus of the community over that of the individual. This work assumes the reality of God or more broadly speaking the numinous, it is still possible and necessary for the relationship between ritualization and holiness to be explored from other perspectives.⁵¹

Saints and Mystics: Imitators of Christ

Saints have been lauded over the centuries because of their individual holiness, which has been understood as reflecting the holiness of Christ. This holiness takes place within a community but reflects concern for the individual's virtue. The fruits of the Spirit in the New Testament are concerned with this individual spiritual achievement, "But the fruits of the spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control".⁵² Today, holiness, often still carries – from its Biblical roots- the idea of living a rigorously moral life. Sometimes, it is associated with a sense of the numinous being embodied within an individual, such that encountering this individual is akin to encountering the numinous.⁵³ Of course, in Christian understanding, this experience is preeminent in encountering Christ, as Jesus Himself said, "Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father."⁵⁴ Jesus is God in the flesh. To encounter Christ is to literally encounter God. Peter after meeting Jesus for the first time reflects an awareness of moral excellence and the numinous in Christ when he states, "Lord, go away from me.; I am a sinful man."⁵⁵ These two conceptions of holiness – moral and numinous – have

⁵¹ This approach was taken by William James who concluded after his seminal study, "I feel bound to say that religious experience, as we have studied it, cannot be cited as unequivocally supporting the infinitist belief. The only thing that it unequivocally testifies to is that we can experience union with something larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace." William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 468.

⁵² Galatians 5:22-23.

⁵³ This idea might further develop by conceptualizing holy persons as holy places. Such that encountering a saint is akin to visiting a holy place.

⁵⁴ John 14:9.

⁵⁵ Luke 5:8.

come together in the understanding of what it means to be a saint. The saint imitates Christ in that the saint reflects the perfect moral excellence and numinous reality of Jesus Christ.

This work defines holiness as a Christ centered way of life that fuses together moral excellence and close relationship with God and with others. This holiness may be manifested in a variety of life stages and social locations, not only by those committed to the contemplative life as solitaries or religious. However, these specific ways of living the contemplative life, were central concerns for many saints and mystics, including Walter Hilton. Not only have saints been understood as embodying a certain moral excellence and closeness to the divine⁵⁶ but they have also brought the experience of God to others in a unique way. Michael Ramsey defines a saint as “The saint is one who has a strange nearness to God, and makes God real and near to other people.”⁵⁷ The saint is not only morally excellent and close to God; her or his presence, words, and very embodiment communicate the reality of the divine to other human beings – who may be far from being saints.⁵⁸

Saints and mystics engage in rituals. This is obvious, but what is more complicated is the relationship between ritualization and holiness. Does the practice of

⁵⁶The concept of the divine or numinous is analogous in some respects to Paul Tillich’s conception, “The dimension of ultimate reality is the dimension of the Holy.” Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1999), 49.

⁵⁷ Douglas Dales, ed. *Glory Descending: The Spiritual Theology of Michael Ramsey* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005), 149.

⁵⁸ This lends further worth to an investigation of holy persons as holy places. If a saint is a person who helps to make the numinous real for others, then a certain power or heightened presence of the numinous attached or embodied in the saint that is able to capture the attention of individuals who normally are not aware of God. In other words, there is something “more,” something “overtly spiritual” that communicates to less actively spiritual individuals when they visit a holy place or meet a holy person. What is that something more?

religious ritual contribute to the development of sainthood? Most human beings throughout history and today engage in religious rituals, yet few of them are recognized as saints. Is it that saints engage in certain rituals that other human beings do not? Such that saints form a sort of secret society, passing down the secret rituals, of which they alone have access? Is it the frequency of their participation in rituals? This work argues that holiness itself is a process of ritualization. The saint is a person who lives a highly ritualized life.

Historically and contemporarily saints have been recognized by popular acclamation. Also, there are official processes for saints to be recognized on the calendar of most liturgical denominations. The popular acclamation usually precedes the second process, and sometimes remains the only form of recognition of a person's holiness. In both situations, moral excellence and an unusual relationship with the numinous have traditionally been qualifications for an individual to be recognized as a saint.⁵⁹ Nathan Mitchell writes that "ritual was not primarily a symbol system aimed at the production of meaning but a technology...aimed at the production of a virtuous self...of a person who is obedient, humble, chaste, charitable, compassionate, hospitable, and wise."⁶⁰ The idea of ritual, especially in a monastic setting, being a technology for self-development, or perhaps more accurately self-renunciation is ancient.⁶¹ The person pursuing holiness is increasingly seeking to enter into a ritualized life, such that his or her, self-will, is sacrificed to the will of God, and even their mental functioning and intuition, becomes

⁵⁹ Today, some liturgical calendars feature individuals who have achieved some notable achievement, but whose traditional qualifications to be a saint (moral excellence and embodying the numinous) seem to be questionable.

⁶⁰ Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh, *Foundations in Ritual Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 105. In fact, the Church has a vast treasure trove of these technologies, which have been the study of ascetical and mystical theology, often referred to today as spiritual theology.

⁶¹ Bradshaw and Melloh, *Foundations in Ritual Studies*, 110.

ritualized, as they enter the divine habitus.⁶² Mystics, like Walter Hilton, can be understood as teaching the path to sainthood or more generally, the path to encounter and union with God. This among other reasons, warrants attention to their lives and to their writings.

⁶² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79.

CHAPTER TWO. WALTER HILTON AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

Hilton's Life and Works

Walter Hilton was an Augustinian canon,⁶³ spiritual director, and writer in fourteenth-century England. It was time of social and ecclesial upheaval. The Black Death, which raged throughout the century, killed upwards of half the population.⁶⁴ John Wycliffe's Lollard movement, a precursor to the Protestant Reformation, was a constant source of controversy.⁶⁵ Hilton's own prior at Thurgarton was authorized to arrest Lollards.⁶⁶ The Peasant Revolt of 1381, prompted by high taxes and dissatisfaction with the serfdom system, was marked by bloodshed.⁶⁷ The One Hundred Years War with France was in progress, which contributed to the high taxation.⁶⁸ It was also a time of mystics and monastics. Hilton, and near contemporaries such as: Richard Rolle,⁶⁹ the unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*,⁷⁰ and Julian of Norwich⁷¹ contributed to what is often referred to as the "Golden Age of English Mysticism."⁷²

⁶³ David Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsel of Walter Hilton* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1985), xix. Canons, were semi-monastic, living in community, and often served the pastoral needs of the local community. Jeffery writes, "Canons were involved in the ordinary day-to-day workings of the community. Hilton would have had every reason to be familiar with the market life of his village, labor in the fields, and the ordinary necessities of rural and small-town life." The canons were different, though related with a common origin in Augustinian, from the Austin friars. See Anik Laferriere, "The Austin Friars in Pre-Reformation England," Ph.D. diss., (University of Oxford, 2017).

⁶⁴ John Hatcher, *The Black Death: A Personal History* (Philadelphia: De Capo Press, 2008), xi.

⁶⁵ John Clark and Rosemary Dorward, eds., *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection* (New York: Paulist, 1991), 30.

⁶⁶ Claire Kerchberger, *Walter Hilton: The Goad of Love* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2013), 22-23.

⁶⁷ Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 51.

⁶⁸ Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at war c.1300-c.1450*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24.

⁶⁹ Rosamund Allen, *Richard Rolle: The English Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

⁷⁰ James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1981).

⁷¹ Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, ed. James Walsh (Mahwah: Paulist, 1978).

⁷² McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, x.

Walter Hilton was born around the year 1340. While not conclusive, it seems likely that he was born in the village of Hilton, in Huntingdonshire, England.⁷³ We know nothing of his parents or family life, though he would have grown up during one of the worst outbreaks of the Black Death. He entered Cambridge around the year 1357. He studied civil and canon law.⁷⁴ Civil law was a precursor to the study of canon law in the fourteenth century. It appears that he practiced canon law in the consistory court system for several years.⁷⁵ Around 1382, Hilton left the practice of law and became a hermit.⁷⁶ Hermits were solitaries. They were not members of religious orders. Hermits committed themselves to lives of prayer and contemplation. Unlike anchorites, such as Julian of Norwich, who remained in one location; hermits, such as Richard Rolle, traveled from place to place. Hilton wrote to his friend and fellow lawyer, Adam Horsley, who was also discerning a religious vocation, “They believe that if you despise the world and dismiss both the study and practice of the law from your mind, cast off honours, degrees and benefices, and choose poverty and humility for Christ’s sake, that you are infatuated and insane.”⁷⁷ In 1386, Hilton entered the community of Augustinian Canons in Thurgarton. He died on the Eve of the Annunciation, March 3, 1396.⁷⁸

All of Hilton’s writings are dated from the last twenty years of his life. This time span encompasses the final years of his practice of canon law, his time as a hermit, and his life as a canon at the priory in Thurgarton. He wrote most of his works as a hermit and

⁷³ Simon Horobin and Linner R. Mooney, eds., *Middle English Texts in Translation* (Suffolk, United Kingdom: York Medieval Press, 2014), 160.

⁷⁴ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 13-14.

⁷⁵ Horobin and Mooney, *Middle English Texts in Translation*, 162.

⁷⁶ Eric College, ed., *The Mediaeval Mystics of England* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 63.

⁷⁷ Horobin and Mooney, *Middle English Texts in Translation*, 161

⁷⁸ Horobin and Mooney, 160.

canon. Hilton's most well-known and influential work is *The Scale of Perfection*.⁷⁹ Hilton wrote the *Scale* to a contemplative nun. It provides comprehensive instruction in pursuing union with God. His treatise, *The Mixed Life*,⁸⁰ is probably the second most well-known and influential of his works. It is written to a layman with worldly responsibilities seeking direction in living the faith. In these works and others, Hilton wrote for both the religious and laity. Hilton wrote a number of other minor works: *On the Image of Sin*, *On the Usefulness and Prerogatives of Religion*, *Letter to Someone Wanting to Renounce the World*, *I Firmly Believe*, *Conclusions Concerning Images*, *On Meditation*, and a commentary on Psalm 90. He also translated *The Goad of Love* from Latin into Middle English. Scholars disagree as to whether he also wrote *On Angels Song* and a commentary on Psalm 91.⁸¹ His works were widely read by religious, clergy, and laity. Julian Gatta tells us, "In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was in England no more highly esteemed devotional writer than Walter Hilton."⁸²

The popularity of his writings is partially understood by their accessibility. While Hilton wrote some of his minor works in Latin, he wrote *The Scale* and *The Mixed Life* in Middle English. In the fourteenth century, there was a movement toward the use of the vernacular language, coupled with a growing literacy among the educated classes. However, this alone does not account for his influence. The impact of his work must also be attributed to his insightful, pastoral, and comprehensive approach. Bernard McGinn writes, "Walter Hilton is usually judged to provide a balanced and accessible introduction

⁷⁹ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*.

⁸⁰ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*.

⁸¹ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 13-17.

⁸² Julia Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time: Julian of Norwich. The Cloud of Unknowing. Walter Hilton* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1986), 17.

to the mystical life.”⁸³ Martin Thornton tell us, “Walter Hilton, Austin Canon Regular of Thurgarton, near Southwell, is at the centre of English ascetical theology, and remains, to my mind, our prime source of teaching on spiritual direction.”⁸⁴ David L. Jeffery, commenting on his insight, writes, “Hilton is one of the great psychologists of the Christian spiritual tradition. He is pragmatic, a spiritual realist.”⁸⁵ Lastly, Joy Russell-Smith attributes much of Hilton’s influence to his willingness to encourage serious prayer and spirituality among the laity, “Hilton was exceptional among writers of his time in giving close attention to the problems of the contemplative life in an active state.”⁸⁶ Hilton’s influence, style, and breadth make him an ideal candidate for the development of practical spiritual theology.

Theological Vision

Hilton’s vision of the spiritual life is shaped and situated within the Augustinian tradition.⁸⁷ Augustine’s historic influence on Western Christianity is without rival.⁸⁸ While Aquinas was emerging as an authority during Hilton’s lifetime,⁸⁹ Augustine remained fixed as the authority in the theological tradition. Once more, Hilton had committed himself to the Augustinian way, by joining a community of canons specifically committed to the Rule of St. Augustine. In England, the tradition of spiritual direction was influenced not only by St. Augustine, but by other great spiritual writers, who like Hilton, were Augustinian canons, such as Richard and Hugh of St. Victor.⁹⁰

⁸³ McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 340.

⁸⁴ Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 176.

⁸⁵ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, xxiv.

⁸⁶ James Walsh, ed., *Pre-Reformation English Spirituality* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 196

⁸⁷ Jill Raitt, ed., *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York: Cross Road, 1989), 196.

⁸⁸ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 22.

⁸⁹ Clark and Dorward, 24.

⁹⁰ Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 110; 117.

Hilton was also an inheritor and participant in a distinctively English eremitical tradition. Some of the influencers and proponents of these tradition were Anslem of Canterbury, Aeldred of Rievaulx, and the unknown author of *Ancrene Wisse*.⁹¹ Hilton also engages directly with the ideas of his near contemporary, the hermit and writer, Richard Rolle.⁹² This English tradition of mysticism and spiritual direction drew upon earlier eremitical and cenobitic⁹³ traditions, including Augustine, but developed overtime to constitute its own school of thought and practice.⁹⁴

John Clark and Rosemary Dorward identify Augustine's *On the Trinity* as being particular influential on Hilton, "in which the doctrine of the Trinity is integrated with the whole theological perspective of creation and redemption. Throughout his writings Hilton recalls points found in this book."⁹⁵ The spiritual life for Hilton is a participation in and pursuit of, union with the Triune God. The human potential for union with God is manifested in the image of God in each human being, the *imago dei*. This image has been tarnished by sin and is in need of restoration. The *imago dei* can be contrasted with the *imago peccati*, the image of sin. Hilton writes, "This is the image that I have spoken of. This—made to the image of God in the first creation—was wonderfully bright and fair, full of burning love and spiritual light, but through the sin of the first man, Adam, it was deformed and changed into another likeness."⁹⁶ This image can only be restored through

⁹¹ Julia Lamm, ed., *Christian Mysticism* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell), 358.

⁹² Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 24.

⁹³ Eremitical monasticism is solitary; whereas; cenobitic is communal. Eremitical monasticism was common in the Christian east, but also during this period in England. While beyond the scope of this work, tracing connections between eremitical monasticism in the east with eremitical practice in England would be interesting. Furthermore, eremitical monasticism was an important feature of the Irish Church in earlier centuries.

⁹⁴ Lamm, *Christian Mysticism*, 358.

⁹⁵ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 24.

⁹⁶ Clark and Dorward, 193.

Christ, “Since our Lord Jesus...died thus for the salvation of man’s soul, it was just that sin should be forgiven, and that man’s soul (which was his image) should become capable of reformation and restoration to the first likeness, and to the bliss of heaven.”⁹⁷

A key concept in Hilton’s theology of the spiritual life is that the reforming of the image comes in two kinds, “The first, which is reforming in faith alone, is sufficient for salvation; the second is worthy of surpassing reward in the bliss of heaven.”⁹⁸ Hilton links reforming in faith with the beginner and proficient stages of the spiritual life and reforming in feeling with the third, that of the perfect.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Hilton’s spiritual direction assumes the traditional distinctions between the active and contemplative life.¹⁰⁰ Actives are those who ordinarily are reformed in faith alone. The spiritual life for actives is focused on love of neighbor, through the traditional works of corporal and spiritual mercy.¹⁰¹ Contemplates are those who are actively seeking, through a life of prayer and renunciation, mystical union with God. Hilton makes some interesting adaptations of these traditional schema that will be explored later. Reforming in faith and reforming in feeling both require ascetical practice. The word itself comes from the Greek term

⁹⁷ Clark and Dorward, 200.

⁹⁸ Clark and Dorward, 199.

⁹⁹ Clark and Dorward, 200. These stages are employed extensively in spiritual theology and in the writings of various ancient and medieval mystics. The beginner stage is oriented toward the development of virtue and the overcoming of sin (purgation). The proficient stage is oriented toward the early stages of contemplative, with a focus on interior meditation and prayer (illuminative). The third stage, the perfect, is oriented the experience of union with God and advanced stages of prayer (unitive).

¹⁰⁰ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, xx-xxi.

¹⁰¹ Peter Clark and Sarah James, eds., *Pastoral Care in Medieval England: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2020). The Works of Corporeal Mercy 1. To Feed the Hungry, 2. To give drink to the thirsty, 3. To clothe the naked, 4. To Harbor the harborless/Shelter the Homeless, 5. To visit the sick, 6. To ransom the captive/Visit the Imprisoned, 7. To bury the dead. The Spiritual Works of Mercy 1. *To instruct the ignorant*, 2. *To counsel the doubtful*, 3. *To admonish sinners*, 4. To bear wrongs patiently, 5. To forgive offenses willingly, 6. *To comfort the afflicted*, 7. To pray for the living and the dead.

askesis, meaning exercise. Hence, ascetical theology's concern with spiritual exercise and practice.

The need for exercise or spiritual discipline is also attested to in Scripture, Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.¹⁰²

The prize in Hilton's conception of the spiritual life is God and specifically union with God through contemplation.¹⁰³ Hilton follows Augustinian theology and anthropology in understanding the human soul as a created trinity (memory or reason, intelligence or reason, desire or love). The fall has removed from human beings both an intuitive awareness of God and a natural conformity to following God's will. The spiritual life and its end, union with God, seek to restore this awareness and conformity.¹⁰⁴ This gift of contemplation is pursued through the three traditional stages of the mystical life: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive.¹⁰⁵ Hilton recognizes that, "Reforming in fullness cannot be had in this life, but it is postponed after this life to the glory of heaven."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² 1 Cor. 9:24-27 (New International Version).

¹⁰³ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Clark and Dorward, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 22.

¹⁰⁶ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 198.

Major Emphases

Hilton is rigorously Christocentric in his theology and in centering the pursuit of the spiritual life in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The reformation of the image of God is related to the individual's relationship with the Lord, "For as long as he does not find his image reformed in you he is a stranger to you, and far away."¹⁰⁷ The spiritual life's goal of union with God is not merely a state of purity or perfection for Hilton, but is a personal experience of Jesus Christ, drawing closer and closer to the individual. In fact, the reformation of the soul, is ultimately a pursuit of Christ likeness, "There is no virtue you can practice...able to make you resemble our Lord without humility and charity."¹⁰⁸ This emphasis on Christ was not always present in the writings of Hilton's day. For example, Hilton makes several editorial adjustments, as well as additions, in his translation of *The Goad of Love*, but one of the most telling is his "addition of many Christocentric passages. This procedure has been found to have been carried out deliberately and in great detail throughout his translation."¹⁰⁹

Hilton is open to and encouraging of lay spirituality. His writings were popular with laity, religious, and clergy. In traditional ascetical theology, a serious spiritual life was thought only possible by retreating from the world in the eremitical or cenobitic fashion. In *The Scale of Perfection*, book one, Hilton reaffirms this notion. However, in book two, written sometime later, Hilton seems open to the possibility of the laity pursuing the contemplative life in some measure. Further, Hilton's actual guidance to lay people, as found in *The Mixed Life* and a *Treatise Written to a Devout Man*, not only

¹⁰⁷ Clark and Dorward, 123.

¹⁰⁸ Clark and Dorward, 123.

¹⁰⁹ Kerchberger, *Walter Hilton: The Goad of Love*, 51.

consider the possibility of serious lay spirituality, but by implication may suggest a critique of the contemplative life as the normative standard for mature faith and practice.¹¹⁰ For Hilton, an individual's state in life is determinative of how they should live their faith. Hilton commends a third option, between that of the active and contemplative lives, what he calls the mixed life.

Earlier writers like Gregory the Great and Augustine commended this path for bishops and pastors, but Hilton innovates by suggesting that the mixed life is appropriate for “both those who would be pastors and those who are disposed to positions of secular responsibility.”¹¹¹ In writing to a powerful man, who was wondering if he should abandon his business and familial responsibilities in favor of the contemplative life, Hilton writes, “You must not altogether follow your said desire in giving over or neglecting those businesses and cares of the world that are necessary, and do belong to you, either for your upholding...or in the ruling of other persons or things that pertain to your charge.”¹¹² Hilton argues that those who abandon their responsibilities or relationships in order to pursue God “do not fulfill the law of love.”¹¹³ Hilton lifts up Jesus as an example of the mixed life, “At times he communed and mixed with people, showing to them his deeds of mercy. He taught...he visited the sick and healed...he fed the hungry...and he comforted....At other times he broke away from...all worldly folk, and of his disciples...and went alone into the desert...and continued there all night in

¹¹⁰ Hilton's praise for the mixed life, and opening it to lay people with worldly responsibilities, is an indirect critique of the contemplative life. It may be a theological move his readers could make, even as he, continued in various writings, as did other spiritual writers of his age, hold up the contemplative life as ideal for those called or able to pursue it. Interestingly, Hilton himself, as an Austin Canon would have lived the mixed life, not the purely contemplative life.

¹¹¹ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 11.

¹¹² Harry Plantinga, ed., *Walter Hilton: Treatise Written to a Devout Man* (Aeterna Press, 2015), 3.

¹¹³ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 11.

prayer.”¹¹⁴ Hilton’s recognition of the realities of the lives of lay people, filled with relationships and responsibilities, combined with his insistence that a serious spiritual life could be lived “in the world” no doubt contributed to his popularity as a devotional writer.

Hilton is rigorously Biblical in his theology and in his spiritual direction. For those able, he commended the reading of Holy Scripture. The reading of Holy Scripture by the laity and in the vernacular was still controversial in Hilton’s time. The Lollard movement, which was condemned as heretical, and which Hilton’s own community in Thurgarton was familiar, was to many an example of the dangers of encouraging both lay spirituality and Bible reading. Hilton avoids these dangers by assuming “an ecclesial and Christological basis for bible reading.”¹¹⁵ The spiritual life is to be pursued within the doctrine and practice of the Church.¹¹⁶ Hilton’s writings are filled with Biblical quotations and allusions. He employs the traditional medieval understanding of Scripture: the literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical.¹¹⁷ Meditation, *lectio*, on Scriptural texts, a classic practice of the contemplative life, is commended by Hilton.¹¹⁸ Hilton warns against the limits of Biblical knowledge in terms of attaining the goals of the spiritual life, “This knowledge is good, and it may be called a part of contemplation... Yet this kind of knowledge is common to good and bad, because it may be had without charity.”¹¹⁹ Here again, Hilton stresses the relational nature of the spiritual life. Knowledge, whether Biblical or otherwise, is helpful in so much that it facilitates love

¹¹⁴ Jeffery, 11.

¹¹⁵ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 38.

¹¹⁶ Clark and Dorward, 38.

¹¹⁷ Clark and Dorward, 38.

¹¹⁸ Clark and Dorward, 79.

¹¹⁹ Clark and Dorward, 79.

toward God and neighbor. Also, the personal knowledge of Christ, received through the reformation of the image of God in an individual, can only be achieved through God's gift in concert with human receptivity.¹²⁰

Select Teachings

From Active to Contemplative and Back Again. In providing guidance to lay people who might pursue the mixed life, Hilton encourages them to give proper attention to both the active and contemplative aspects of their lives. "If you have been at prayer for some period of time, break off...and occupy yourself cheerfully and busily in some physical work for the benefit of your fellow Christians....By the same token, when you have for a season been outwardly busy with your employees or other men in pursuit of profit, you should break off and revert to your prayers and devotions."¹²¹ Hilton conceived of the mixed life as an option for lay people with significant responsibilities in the world who still desired to pursue a serious spiritual life. This pattern of moving back and forth from active works to contemplative practices would be commended by many Christians today. Since most of the population in Western countries is now literate, many could participate fully in the means and methods of pursuing the mixed life as taught by Hilton, including, meditation on Holy Scripture.

Kindling the Fire of Love. Desire for God and for reformation in feeling must be nurtured. Hilton conceives of spiritual practices (what he refers to sometimes as customs) as kindling sticks, to maintain and grow an individual's desire for God. He writes, "The more sticks are laid on a fire, the greater is the flame, and so the more varied the spiritual

¹²⁰ Clark and Dorward, 280.

¹²¹ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 16.

work that anyone has in mind for keeping his desire whole, the more powerful and ardent shall be his desire for God.”¹²² Kindling wood is useful in so much that it lights a fire. Hilton argues the same for spiritual practices, “A particular custom is always good to keep if it consists in getting virtue and hindering sin” whereas a custom that “that hinders a better work should be left.”¹²³ Once again, the spiritual life is ultimately relational, a reformation in feeling. Duties and obligations alone are not sufficient for attending to the love of God. Hilton, in keeping with Biblical and Augustinian tradition, conceives of God as a fire, “This is, of course, not to say that God is the element called fire...Rather, it is another way of saying that God is love, for just as a fire consumes every physical thing that is combustible, just so the love of God burns and consumes all sin and dross from the soul, refining and purifying it, like an intense fire purifying metal.” Contemporary Christians would do well to attend to their own soul fires and to engage in spiritual practices that keep the fire of their own love of God and neighbor burning bright.

The Parable of the Pilgrim. Hilton uses a parable to illustrate the goal and challenges of the spiritual life. In the parable, the pilgrim is told that getting to Jerusalem is difficult, “The way was long and imperiled by hordes of thieves and robbers, as well as many other hindrances such as can beset a traveler. And there was a great diversity of routes...along which people were killed and despoiled every day, and prevented them from coming to their destination.”¹²⁴ Yet, the pilgrim is assured that should he follow one road, he will arrive in the holy city. The road is clear intention and focus. A focus on arriving in the city, of ignoring all distractions and temptations, and constantly keeping

¹²² Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 230.

¹²³ Clark and Dorward, 230.

¹²⁴ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 105.

the purpose of the journey in mind. Hilton writes, “Think always on Jerusalem.”¹²⁵ Jerusalem represents union with God and “the spiritual presence of Jesus.”¹²⁶ Again, Hilton commends spiritual exercise, recognizing, however, these exercises may vary over time, “For while your desire and the yearning of your heart toward Jesus should be fixed and unchanging, your spiritual endeavors that support you in prayer and in thought, feeding, and nourishing your desire may be diverse and usefully interchanged as you are led by grace in the application to them of your own heart.”¹²⁷ Contemporary Christians would benefit from conceiving the spiritual life as an arduous journey with pitfalls and temptations, requiring serious prayer, spiritual exercise, and the grace of God.

The Hound and the Hare. Hilton writes, “A hound that runs after the hare, only because he sees other hounds running will rest when he is tired, and turn back; but if he runs because he sees the hare, he will not flag for weariness until he has it.”¹²⁸ Hilton explains, “If anyone has a grace, however small, and decides to stop working with it and make himself labor at another that he does not yet have, only because he sees or hears that others are doing so, he may indeed run for a while until he is weary; and then he will turn home again.” Hilton refers to St. Paul and the spiritual gifts in explaining this illustration.¹²⁹ He is encouraging his readers to make use of the gifts and aptitudes that are theirs and not others. He further explains, “For example, some shall be saved and come to blessedness by bodily actions and by works of mercy, some by great penance; some by sorrow and weeping for their sins...some by preaching and teaching; and some by

¹²⁵ Jeffery, 106.

¹²⁶ Jeffery, 106.

¹²⁷ Jeffery, 108.

¹²⁸ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 111.

¹²⁹ Clark and Dorward, 111. See also St. Paul’s discussion of the gifts. 1 Corinthians 12. Romans 12. Ephesians 4.

various graces and gifts of devotion.”¹³⁰ It would benefit contemporary Christians to learn their own gifts and aptitudes and pursue the spiritual life with these, rather than desiring or wishing gifts and aptitudes that are not their own. This is a further refinement of the question of state of life: active, contemplative, or mixed.

The Garden of the Soul. Hilton compares the soul to a garden. Gardening one’s soul, cultivating flowers of virtue, and pruning one’s sins, naturally flow from this association. However, Hilton’s emphasis in this parable is addressing underlying issues. He writes, “In this you could be like a man who had in his garden a polluted well with many irrigation ditches running from it. He went and dammed up the ditches, but left the wellspring intact, imagining his problem was solved.”¹³¹ Without attention to the sources of various problems of the spiritual life, real progress will be hindered. Hilton writes, “It can be the same way for you and me, even if we have had the grace and strength to stop up our external ditches, failing to beware properly the source within...unless you stop and cleanse that as much as you are able, it will corrupt all the flowers in the garden of your soul.”¹³² Contemporary Christians would find value in assessing and pursuing the spiritual life by looking to their hearts and to the sources of various internal challenges they face. For Hilton, the mark of whether you have made progress in dealing with the external and internal sin is the measure of love. This motivation or desire of the heart in love relates again to Hilton’s second stage of the spiritual life, being reformed in feeling.

Running After Butterflies. Hilton often enjoins his readers to keep their sights set on the final goal of the spiritual life: union with God. At times he describes this union

¹³⁰ Clark and Dorward, 112.

¹³¹ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 82.

¹³² Jeffery, 72.

or realized contemplation, with heaven, sometimes with the vision of Jesus, and at others in arriving in Jerusalem. He describes heaven, “as great happiness is there, and what wonderful joy and delight; for there is neither sin, nor sorrow, nor passion nor pain, hunger nor thirst, aches nor sickness, doubt nor fear, shame nor blame, nor want of power, nor strength, nor lack of light, nor coldness in love; but there is most excellent beauty, clearness, strength, health, everlasting delights, perfect wisdom, love, peace, honour, security, rest, joy, and bliss in abundance without ever having an end.”¹³³ There are many distractions from this vision. Hilton writes, “Many...are covetous of worldly goods, honours, and...riches...surely...these are not wise; they are like to children that run after butterflies, and, because they look not to their feet, they sometimes easily fall down and break their legs.”¹³⁴ Hilton wishes his readers to keep focused on the higher aims of the spiritual life. This does not remove the possibility of engagement in earthly matters or everyday responsibilities, but that the individual keeps the big picture of their life and the meaning of life in mind day to day. Contemporary Christians, especially those seeking to live the active or mixed life, could find great benefit in regularly glancing at the ground of their spiritual feet.

The Courtship of the Soul. Hilton always characterizes both the ends and the means of the spiritual life as being about love. Sometimes, he illustrates this reality by comparing God’s love for us in courtly terms.¹³⁵ He writes, “The Scriptures are nothing else but love letters, epistles between a loving soul and Jesus its beloved, or as I shall say

¹³³ Plantinga, *Walter Hilton: Treatise Written to a Devout Man*, 29.

¹³⁴ Plantinga, 3.

¹³⁵ Courtly terms, including nuptial imagery, and even the concept of spiritual marriage were popular themes and illustrations with a wide variety of mystical writers prior to, during, and after Hilton’s time. See McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 332-333; 388.

more truly, between Jesus the true lover and the souls loved by him.”¹³⁶ For those who have lost a desire for devotion he recommends, “Concentrate all your desires and activities on preparing a place and a secret chamber in your soul for your Lord Jesus Christ, your husband.”¹³⁷ This chamber is one of continued devotion, despite a lack of desire for devotion, and a continued practice of prayer, despite a desire to pray. He assures his readers that God in Christ is the wisest of lovers, “Rest assured that all the work that Jesus does in the soul is to make it a true and perfect bride for himself in the height and fullness of love...he offers such gracious whispers in the manner of one who is courting, wooing his chosen soul to himself.”¹³⁸ It might be helpful for contemporary Christians to keep the relational nature of the spiritual life at the forefront of their minds. While nuptial and bridal imagery will not appeal to all individuals, the concept of God’s pursuit of us is a central truth to keep in mind when pursuing a spiritual life.

The Foundation of Vocal Prayer. Hilton’s Augustinian focus on desire and reformation in feeling is not to be confused with a spirituality that is based purely on emotion. Hilton regularly enjoins his readers to fan the flame of their spiritual love through various exercises and practices. Nonetheless, he recognizes that love is an act of the will and that there will be times when a desire for prayer or devotion to God will be weakened or not present. In these circumstances, he encourages a persistence in vocal prayer, “Hold on then to the recitation of vocal prayers, and not easily break them off; for often it happens that praying with the mouth keeps devotion; and if in such case you

¹³⁶ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 169.

¹³⁷ Walter Hilton, *8 Chapters on Perfection & Angel’s Song*, trans. Rosemary Dorward (Oxford: SLG Press, 1992), 8.

¹³⁸ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 171.

ceased from vocal prayer, your devotion would vanish.”¹³⁹ Here and elsewhere, he envisions the spiritual life as a cycle not unlike that of the contemporary practice of *lectio*. There will be periods of vocal prayer, of spiritual reading, of meditation, and then, when graced and given, contemplation. Periods of dryness or accide¹⁴⁰ are bound to come but can become overcome through persistence in prayer and through the gift of love, “And love does even more, for it slays accidie and the idleness of the flesh, making the soul lively and swift for the service of Jesus.”¹⁴¹ Contemporary Christians would be wise to develop vocal habits of prayer and not to abandon them, but to develop them as foundational habits for their discipleship.

The Spiritual or Inner Eye. The spiritual life, while involving participation and preparation on our part, is ultimately a life that rests on the gifts of God. Union with God can only be given through God’s gift. At best, the individual can prepare themselves to receive that gift. The insight or illumination of the spiritual eye “cannot be acquired through human toil alone, but...by the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴² Hilton is keen to differentiate intellectual knowledge from spiritual knowledge. He writes, “The greatest scholar on earth cannot with all his wit imagine what this opening of the spiritual eye is or fully declare it with his tongue, for it cannot be acquired by study or through human toil alone, but principally by the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴³ Hilton is himself a scholar and commends scholarly knowledge, but sees it as a means, not the ends of the spiritual life. Further, the spiritual eye can enlighten intellectual knowledge, “And this is another

¹³⁹ Plantinga, *Walter Hilton: Treatise Written to a Devout Man*, 31.

¹⁴⁰ Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 74.

¹⁴¹ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 279.

¹⁴² Clark and Dorward, 280.

¹⁴³ Clark and Dorward, 280.

work of contemplation: to see Jesus in the Scriptures after the opening of the spiritual eye.” Contemporary Christians would find it useful to ponder the differences, as well as the mutuality, between spiritual and intellectual knowledge.

Hilton and Spiritual Practical Theology

The goal of practical spiritual theology is to do spiritual theology through the writings of a specific mystic or spiritual teacher, in conversation with the experience of contemporary believers. Hilton is a good candidate for developing this way of doing spiritual theology because we have access to a number of his writings, translated from Latin and Middle English. Hilton addresses the spiritual life in comprehensive terms, in a way that is applicable to Christians in a number of situations and states of life. Hilton is an example of nascent spiritual practical theology, in that he gave spiritual counsel on the basis of the theological tradition he had received, as well as from his experience of the spiritual life and his experience in guiding the spiritual life of others. Hilton did not have access to contemporary social science and its methods. The use of such methods is a distinctive aspect of spiritual practical theology. These methods will be explored in a later chapter. Related to these methods is the importance of bringing a specific mystics’ writings and thought in conversation with contemporary conceptions of Christian growth and development. In this work, the writings and thought of the Christian educator, Thomas Groom, will serve as Hilton’s conversation partner.

CHAPTER THREE. PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY AND SHARED CHRISTIAN PRAXIS

Thomas Groome and Religious Education

Practical theology has been described as a theological discipline encompassing the traditional arts of ministry as well as a broader academic discipline exploring the relationship between experience and faith. Religious education, specifically Christian education (also referred to as Christian formation), is a subdiscipline of practical theology. This subdiscipline is a useful conversation partner in the development of practical spiritual theology because of its goal to bring a historical mystic or spiritual teacher's writings into conversation with the experience of contemporary Christians. Thomas Groome's way of shared praxis provides a comprehensive approach to modern religious education.¹⁴⁴ Groome brings his own experience of Christian education with modern persons to his work, as well as reflection on the work of previous thinkers and researchers. Groome's work and method can be used to present a historical writer of the Christian spiritual life to contemporary Christians. Groome writes to instruct communities, teachers of Christian formation, and individual Christian educators.¹⁴⁵

Purposes of Christian Education

Groome understands religious education as constituting three essential characteristics: the transcendent, the ontological, and the political.¹⁴⁶ Christian education is oriented toward the ultimate. Its religious character is concerned with transcendent realities. In a Christian context, such education is intended to foster a relationship with

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991).

¹⁴⁵ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 2-3.

¹⁴⁶ Groome, 11.

God and others. Christian education is not only concerned with the cognitive dimension of being human, but of every dimension of being human. The nature of being, of existence or what constitutes being human, concerns religious education and necessarily has a social dimension as well. Christian education is also political. The content of Christian action, and its nurture of being in relationship with God, others, and self, is not a purely private affair. All instruction has a political component. It is political in the general sense of how knowledge and its exercise can enable or inhibit the flourishing of human communities.

Building on these three characteristics, Groome outlines three purposes of Christian education. The first purpose of Christian education is for the reign of God. The second is for live Christian faith. The third is for the wholeness of human freedom for all.¹⁴⁷ Groome writes, “I propose the Biblical symbol that best expresses the overarching telos of being Christian and thus evokes the metapurpose of Christian religious education is the *reign of God*.”¹⁴⁸ The reign of God points to God’s sovereignty over creation and history. The reign of God contrasts with the reign of many human structures, particularly in its intentions for peace and justice. Human beings can participate in the reign of God, but its completion and realization require God’s grace or gift. Jesus through his life and teaching, death and resurrection is the central figure of this reign. The reign of God forms the background and ultimate purpose of Christian education for Groome. The more immediate purpose of Christian education is “to promote lived Christian faith in the lives of participants.”¹⁴⁹ This lived faith is holistic, engaging the whole person and their social

¹⁴⁷ Groome, 14.

¹⁴⁸ Groome, 14.

¹⁴⁹ Groome, 18.

context. It has cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Groome critiques the idea, endemic to Western religious education, that imparting cognitive knowledge is sufficient to encourage lived Christian faith. Instead, he writes, “Religious education for lived Christian faith is an ontological enterprise that is to inform, form, and transform people in heads, hearts, and life-styles; it is to engage nothing less than the marrow bone of people – together.”¹⁵⁰ Groome’s third purpose, regarding wholeness and human freedom, is intended to be an affirmation of traditional ideas of salvation cast in a contemporary idiom, which captures the reality of salvation’s consequences for the existential moment and the ultimate here after. Groome states, “My contention is that both the impetus for and the consequence of people living in Christian faith is the wholeness of human freedom that is fullness of life for all, here and hereafter.”¹⁵¹ This broader sense of salvation reflects Groome’s concern that Christian education and lived Christian faith lead to emancipatory ends for all people, including those who have been marginalized in the Church and the wider society.¹⁵² This broader, more holistic concern for education, reflects the concerns intended by use of the term Christian formation. Education for Groome is to form and transform individuals. The result of Christian education, encompassing the essentials characteristics and directed toward the purposes previously stated, is conation.

Conation

¹⁵⁰ Groome, 18.

¹⁵¹ Groome, 22.

¹⁵² Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1989), 68.

Groome has taken the word conation, which is defined as “the conscious drive to perform volitional acts”¹⁵³ and developed its meaning for the purposes of his work. Groome suggests wisdom, in the sense of Christian wisdom, as being an alternative descriptor of conation. He traces the word back to Platonic usage, where conation is “not one of activity of the psyche but the more holistic capacity and disposition people have to realize their own being; it is the agency that undergirds one’s cognition, affection, and volition.”¹⁵⁴ Conative activities are activities that engage people holistically, at every level of their being. Such an activity would engage and encourage lived Christian faith cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally. Groome cites the answer to the old catechism question, “Why did God make you?” as a conative, “to know, love, and serve God in this life.”¹⁵⁵ Christian education should be conative and conative educative activity should lead to Christian wisdom. Wisdom being preeminently embodied in Jesus Christ, who the Scriptures declare as being “the wisdom of God.”¹⁵⁶

Epistemology

Groome adopts an epistemic ontology. Cognitive knowledge and knowing is recognized as one aspect of knowing and is connected to the more holistic notion of being. This approach, while valuing the contributions of critical rationality, argues for a phenomenological and liberative approach to knowledge.¹⁵⁷ Groome affirms much of traditional theology and formational approaches while uniting them (or critiquing them) with more critical philosophical and theological approaches. He identifies four critical

¹⁵³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 26.

¹⁵⁴ Groome, 27.

¹⁵⁵ Groome, 30.

¹⁵⁶ 1 Cor. 1:24.

¹⁵⁷ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 74; 80.

areas of significance. The first is that critical approaches or post-enlightenment reason has brought about the recognition of the historically conditioned nature of Christian faith, symbols, and theology. The second area is the development of critical biblical scholarship, which has brought more constructive and deconstructive views to Scripture texts. The third area is that critical approaches have encouraged the reformulation of Christian ideas in dialectic with numerous social situations and settings. The fourth area is personal reflexivity, which calls for educators and interpreters to recognize their own and other socially conditioned assumptions and interests.¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, Groome argues for what he calls a “humanizing rationality that brings knowers and known into a dialectical and right relationship of care that is life-giving for self, others, and creation.”¹⁵⁹

Shared Christian Praxis

In order to achieve the ends of Christian education, Groome proposes a pedagogical method of shared Christian praxis. He writes, “Praxis as the defining term of this pedagogical approach refers to the consciousness and agency that arise from and are expressed in any and every aspect of people’s being as agent-subjects-in-relationship whether realized in actions that are personal, interpersonal, sociopolitical, or cosmic.”¹⁶⁰ The approach is shared. The educator engages in the learning process with others. It is not a banking model of education.¹⁶¹ The Christian part of the approach is specifically the Christian/Story vision, which broadly speaking, “includes God’s self-disclosure to the people of Israel as mediated through the Hebrew Scriptures; it has its highpoint in Jesus

¹⁵⁸ Groome, 81.

¹⁵⁹ Groome, 82.

¹⁶⁰ Groome, 136.

¹⁶¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 54.

the Christ, who Christians believe is the heart of God's Story/Vision for humankind; and it symbolizes the Christian tradition since then and the living faith to which disciples are called in the community of Jesus."¹⁶² The use of story implies people, life, and the embodied ends of Christian education. For Groome, story encompasses doctrinal truth, but connotes a wider meaning appropriate for the broader ends of conation.

There are five movements to shared Christian praxis, which are preceded by a focusing activity. The movements are: (1) Naming Present Praxis, (2) Critical Reflection on Present Praxis, (3) Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision, (4) Dialectical Hermeneutic to Appropriate Christian Story/Vision to Participants' Stories and Visions, and (5) Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith.¹⁶³ These five movements will be further explored using Walter Hilton.

Hilton and Shared Christian Praxis: An Example

To explore how Groome's method might be employed, a hypothetical case study will be utilized using the five movements. In keeping with the aims of practical spiritual theology, this imagined case study will also use sociological data. The imagined setting will be a seminar with research participants drawn from the undergraduate population of Saint Thomas University. The initial focusing activity would be a brief presentation of Walter Hilton, following the major contours of the information provided earlier in this work. The participants would be given an opportunity to respond to this presentation and ask further questions about Hilton. This would lay an initial foundation for their engagement with Hilton that will be further explored in movement three.

¹⁶² Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 139.

¹⁶³ Groome, 146-148.

M1: Exploring Spirituality. The first movement involves a general brainstorm and discussion revolving around the question, “what is spirituality?” This is the focusing activity. It involves a brainstorm, as many ideas—freely associated—with spirituality listed on the board. There would be no judgment of ideas, and all ideas will be included. The second part of this movement of the exploration of spirituality involves grouping the ideas and looking for common themes to develop and emerge. Based on previous experience with students and with individuals in general, it is likely that themes of prayer, God, meditation, and other activities and concepts would be presented. The issue of identity would frame a discussion of the question of religion versus spirituality. It is expected that some students will identify with or sympathize with the idea of being spiritual but not religious.¹⁶⁴

M2: Critical Reflection on Spirituality. The second movement features the research of Nancy Ammerman as a critical conversation partner to deepen participants’ understanding of the contemporary landscape of spirituality, and to help them articulate their own initial sense of spirituality. Ammerman’s extensive qualitative research of American spirituality revealed three major spiritual tribes: theistic, extra-theistic, and ethical. Theistic spirituality is linked to the divine, extra-theistic locates spirituality in various naturalistic forms of transcendence, and ethical spirituality focuses on everyday compassion.¹⁶⁵ Students would be encouraged to consider which tribe best describes their own sense of spiritual identity, as each is described in greater depth.

The theistic tribe sees spirituality linked with God, particular practices, as well as with “mysterious encounters” with God or the divine in daily life. Ammerman describes

¹⁶⁴ See James White, *The Rise of the Nones* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2014).

¹⁶⁵ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, 19.

this tribe as having the ability to “see events as both ordinary and extraordinary, material and spiritual.”¹⁶⁶ Theistic spirituality was strongly associated with those involved in congregations, and less so with those without any affiliation. This was the largest tribe and it also reflected that “a large portion of our American sample is spiritually religious and religiously spiritual.”¹⁶⁷

The extra-theistic tribe understands life as having a larger meaning. This meaning is “immanent frame of explainability and calculation is opened to something beyond...what they are describing may not come from a transcendent deity, but it is nevertheless transcendent.”¹⁶⁸ This tribe might be described as embodying a spirituality of awe, of “what one feels.”¹⁶⁹ The icon of this tribe, “the solitary, contemplating person has become the icon of American spirituality, and this sort of spiritual experience the essence of authentic religiosity.”¹⁷⁰ The research revealed that the nonreligious, “if they have any spiritual vocabulary at all, are likely to speak of it as meaning, awe, connection, and inner wisdom.”¹⁷¹

The ethical tribe highlights one aspect of spirituality that all of Ammerman’s spiritual tribes agreed upon, “that real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right.”¹⁷² This tribe could include people who have a different understanding of the value of believing. It could “either be a way of talking about devout spirituality or a way of

¹⁶⁶ Ammerman, 29.

¹⁶⁷ Ammerman, 31.

¹⁶⁸ Ammerman, 35.

¹⁶⁹ Ammerman, 29.

¹⁷⁰ Ammerman, 31.

¹⁷¹ Ammerman, 35.

¹⁷² Ammerman, 35.

describing superstition.”¹⁷³ One interesting theme for those in this category, and the larger category of non-religious, was an experience they usually had in college. It would be interesting to hear from students about their current experience related to the following theme in Ammerman’s research: “One theme in the secular stories was an encounter with knowledge, usually during their college years, that challenged the beliefs they were taught. Since belief was seen as central to what religion and spirituality are, the implausibility of religious beliefs was a critical factor in their exodus from both.”¹⁷⁴

Ammerman’s research revealed that “most of our participants inhabit is both spiritual and religious at the same time.”¹⁷⁵ Her research revealed that the “spiritual but not religious as a boundary-maintaining device and source of legitimacy than as a description of the empirical situation.”¹⁷⁶ This is a promising indicator that a medieval mystic like Hilton might indeed have something to offer twenty-first century North Americans, and others, in terms of conceptualizing and living out their own spirituality.

M3: Hilton as a Vision of Spirituality. In this third movement, Hilton would be presented as an embodiment of the Christian Story/Vision in a particular place and time. The basic facts of his life would be reviewed, as well as the major themes from his writings. A couple of his specific teachings would be shared. These five movements could be used to present specific teachings or themes in the writings of Walter Hilton and other spiritual writers as a method within Practical Spiritual Theology.

M4: Dialogue between M2 and M3. Movement four would involve a discussion with the students about how Hilton might speak to each of these spiritual tribes as well as

¹⁷³ Ammerman, 40.

¹⁷⁴ Ammerman, 41.

¹⁷⁵ Ammerman, 41.

¹⁷⁶ Ammerman, 51.

themselves directly. It can be presumed that Hilton might have the most resonance and resourcing potential for those belonging to the theistic tribe or landscape. Hilton himself is operating from this perspective. His teachings are intended to help individuals pursue union with God. Further, Ammerman's sample had a largely Christian background, though it included Jewish and Wiccan participants. Hilton's status as a Christian teacher would also tend to recommend him to those embracing a similar belief. The larger concept of the mixed life might have an appeal to those with an extra-theistic spirituality; in that, it would provide a framework for attending to both spiritual growth, practice, and other aspects of life. It is uncertain whether those in the ethical spiritual tribe will find much value in Hilton. This tribe, while the smallest, is composed of those with the least interest in or involvement in any religious community. They may reject him as they have rejected religion in most of its forms. Some may see him valuable only to the extent that those who following his teachings live an ethical life. Hilton would offer a critique and a challenge to those in the extra-theistic and ethical tribes in questioning whether a spiritual life can be pursued by oneself, isolated from a religious and spiritual community. Interestingly, Hilton himself attempted to do this as a hermit, but found that approach lacking.¹⁷⁷

M5: Steps (Potential Praxis in Contemporary Situation). The fifth movement would involve dialoguing with the students about what steps they need to take to attend to their spirituality and how, if at all, Hilton might be useful in discerning those steps. The responses to what next steps students might take would likely vary considerably, but it might involve certain spiritual practices and perhaps, in some cases, involvement with a

¹⁷⁷ Of course, a fourteenth-century hermit, was still part of medieval society, and was specifically seeking a Christian spiritual life, which involved engagement with the Church.

religious or spiritual community. Hilton as a resource could be further pursued by students learning more about his teachings. In fact, a follow up session could be offered for those interested in learning more.

Dialogical Highlights

Walter Hilton and Thomas Groome are separated by seven hundred years. Spiritual theologians from the middle ages cannot be expected to demonstrate familiarity with modern forms of scholarship and certain modern questions. Nonetheless, bringing a modern theologian into dialogue with a historical theologian is a fruitful exercise for practical spiritual theology. Hilton and Groome share an orientation toward the transcendent. Hilton's work as a spiritual director is directed toward union with God. Groome's work as an educator includes a transcendent dimension. Both are also concerned with being, but in different ways. Hilton's concern with the ontological, is contemplative. He understands, in Augustinian fashion, that human beings are meant to find their being in God alone. Groome also understands the ontological dimension in relational terms, but he is more emphatic about the social dimensions of being and of Christian faith more widely. He writes, "It would seem patently true, however that religious education is to make a fundamental difference in how people realize their being in relation with God, self, others, and the world."¹⁷⁸ Hilton's teachings do engage these wider considerations, though mainly in personal terms. For the medieval contemplative, the self is oriented toward God and less to others. For the medieval active, the self is oriented toward God, others, and the world. For the individual pursuing the mixed life, it is an alternating between the contemplative (God) and the active (others and the world).

¹⁷⁸ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 11.

Groome's orientation toward the political is explicit while Hilton's is implicit. For Hilton, the political dimensions of Christian teaching are embodied in the society he lived. To live faithfully according to one's state of life is to contribute to the common good of all.¹⁷⁹ Groome offers a critique of the mystical life in his assessment of Neoplatonism's influence on Christianity, "Praxis was disparaged as unreliable and it was overshadowed by the contemplative life as a way to perfection."¹⁸⁰ Hilton's insistence that those in the active and mixed states attend to the needs of their neighbor provides a contrast to this criticism.¹⁸¹

Hilton and Groome agree on the central thrust of Christian education or spiritual direction as being lived Christian faith. Hilton does not directly engage in significant discussions of the Kingdom of God, or as Groome describes it, the reign of God. The political and structural integration of Christian faith was more explicit in fourteenth-century England, bringing elements of the reign of God, as Groome describes it, into the everyday lives of Hilton and his contemporaries.¹⁸² While there are many differences in method and philosophy between the two theologians, one of the most significant, in terms of contemporary Christian living, is Groome's third purpose of Christian education: "for the wholeness of human freedom that is fullness of life for all."¹⁸³ Groome, throughout his work, stresses the emancipatory and liberative aspects of the Gospel. While Hilton cannot be expected to engage with critical and contextual theologies that arose centuries

¹⁷⁹ The contemplative path was generally recognized as being for a few, not all. The proper ordering of society, from a spiritual perspective, required those in the active and mixed lives tending to their societal duties and obligations.

¹⁸⁰ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 51.

¹⁸¹ Hilton even tells a contemplative that in emergencies they should do such things.

¹⁸² For a more detailed exploration of the role of the Church and State in Hilton's time see W.A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1980).

¹⁸³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 21

after his death, he does not engage in any significant discussion of the social problems of his time. His teachings on charity and love of neighbor indicate he is concerned that Christians in the active and mixed states attend to the needs of others, but, for the most part, he does not explore how they might do this. To be fair, he is writing to individuals who are seeking direction about their prayer life and how to pursue deeper intimacy with God, whether as a contemplative nun or as a man of responsibility in the world. Likewise, his contemporaries, when writing similar works, also tend not to discuss social problems. Even Catherine of Siena, another fourteenth-century mystic, whose ministry was politically and socially engaged on many fronts, gives little explicit attention or recommendations concerning social issues in her mystical work, *The Dialogue*.¹⁸⁴ Yet, in her hundreds of letters, she regularly engages social issues of the day.¹⁸⁵ Perhaps, Hilton, situated in village life in Thurgarton, did engage in social work or ministry, but we have no record of such.

Groome praises some aspects of Augustine's epistemology, which are evident in Hilton.¹⁸⁶ The first is the Augustinian understanding of the unity of reason, memory, and will. Groome writes, "Augustine, even more than Plato...recognized the need for unity between thought and action and for reciprocity between the contemplative life of union with God and the practical life of Christian virtue."¹⁸⁷ The second is Augustine's recognition of the importance of human memory, story, and experience. Augustine is an exemplar of this tradition in his *Confessions*,¹⁸⁸ but this approach is evident in some of

¹⁸⁴ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, ed. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

¹⁸⁵ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 76.

¹⁸⁶ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 53.

¹⁸⁷ Groome, 54.

¹⁸⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

his other, more didactic, writings.¹⁸⁹ Hilton regularly prefaces his comments as coming out of his own experience, and he also encourages his directees to make adjustments to their spiritual practice on the basis of their own experience. Hilton's method of spiritual direction finds cognates with Groome's method of shared Christian praxis.¹⁹⁰ Groome critiques Augustine for his sexism, in associating the mind with men and women with the body.¹⁹¹ There is not a discernable difference in Hilton's direction to women or men. The differences in direction are almost entirely on the basis of their state in life. For contemplatives he encourages traditional contemplative life and practices. For those with worldly responsibilities desiring a closer relationship with God, he encourages the practices of the mixed life. We can assume that Hilton was a man of his time and may have shared certain views on women that would no longer be tenable. Nonetheless, his counsel to women is akin to his counsel of men, and many of the readers of his works were women, both religious and lay.

Conative Mysticism

A potential outcome of dialogue between Groome and Hilton is the concept of conative mysticism. This is an example of practical spiritual theology. In this case, taking Hilton's conception of mysticism and bringing it together with Groome's notion of conation. Bernard McGinn defines mysticism as "a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the

¹⁸⁹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 54.

¹⁹⁰ Groome's general movement from life to faith to life, is not dissimilar to Hilton's method of referring his directees to their own experience (and sometimes his own or that of others) then back to the teachings of the faith and then back to their own practice and future experience.

¹⁹¹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 55.

subject who receives it.”¹⁹² For Hilton, union with God was the goal of the spiritual life. This union would transform the individual, purging them of sin, filling them with virtue, and ultimately with the love of God. This is seen as the goal of the contemplative life and the ultimate goal of Christian life, existentially and eternally. Groome’s concept of conation does not exclude this sort of relationship between the self and God but its goals and concerns are broader, “conative activity engages people’s corporal, mental, and volitional capacities, their heads, hearts, and overt behaviors, their cognition, desire, and will, as they realize their own being in right relationship with others and the world and contribute in ways that are life giving for all.”¹⁹³ The mystic seeking conation is seeking union with God or a life filled with God’s love, holistically, in a way which transforms themselves and promotes the transformation of others and the world. Groome uses the word wisdom as an alternative to conation. Mystic wisdom, in this sense, is not only the experience of the self- uniting to God, but the self increasingly becoming wise to the ways of God, in embodied ways, that lead to transformation for all. This broader notion of the goal of the spiritual life is present in Hilton’s writings, as those pursuing the active and mixed lives must attend to the love of neighbor. Further, a contemplative achieving, by grace, conative mysticism or union, contributes to the welfare of all through their life of prayer. Conative union implies not only union with God, but a unity of spirit between the self, others, and all of creation. This implies, in Hilton’s terms, a love of neighbor that by grace has been purged, illuminated, and ultimately, through union with God, transformed into a selfless love. Conative mysticism can commend all of Hilton’s

¹⁹² Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 26.

¹⁹³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 30.

teachings, while encouraging a broader application of love of neighbor to encompass liberative concerns such as gender and race, which feature prominently in Groome's work. For example, the spiritual life may also embrace works of social justice as a natural extension of charity.

CHAPTER FOUR. HILTON AND HERMENEUTICS

Further Explorations in Practical and Spiritual Theology

Practical theology, like all theology, necessarily involves interpretation.¹⁹⁴ The interpretative dimension to practical theology must be more explicit than in the development of other theologies. This is not because other theologies lack pre-understandings or contextual influences, but because practical theology begins with experience. Often, but not always, this experience concerns that of a faith community. The complexities of interpretation are many when engaged in the study of individuals and communities. The interpretive work of natural science involves subjects who do not – at least in any conventional sense – interpret the scientists who are investigating them.¹⁹⁵

This is not the case with practical theology and with its partner disciplines in the social sciences. The researcher is interpreting the community under investigation, even as she or he is being interpreted by that same community. For my own particular research, on the fourteenth century mystic, Walter Hilton, the interpretive challenge becomes even more complex: Hilton's interpretation of his time and his audience, his interpretation of revelation and Christian Tradition, my own interpretation of Hilton, my own interpretation of revelation and Christian Tradition, and then the interpretation of my

¹⁹⁴ Elaine Graham discusses pastoral hermeneutics, drawing upon the work of Gerkin and Gadamer in *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), 118-120. She highlights narrative as a fruitful interpretive grid for conducting interpretation in pastoral situations. This approach may be useful in conducting research in the area of Practical Spiritual Theology.

¹⁹⁵ The traditional assumption that social science and natural sciences are marked by a difference in kind and not degree is challenged by many modern and post-modern scholars, including Paul Ricoeur in *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 36. "It is...my concern to avoid the pitfall of an opposition between understanding which would be reserved for the human sciences and an explanation which would be common to the latter and to the nomological sciences, primarily the physical sciences."

interviewees (both of Hilton and my interpretation of him), as well as their own interpretation of revelation and Christian Tradition. This interpretive situation illustrates the well-known concept of the hermeneutical spiral.

Practical Spiritual Theology allows the rich wisdom of classical spiritual theology¹⁹⁶ to be brought into dialogue with the contemporary experience of individuals, resulting in a synthesis of ancient wisdom and contemporary practice. This synthesis will result in new spiritual theologies rooted in various contexts for twenty-first century Christians. Practical Spiritual Theology may also be defined as: reflection on human experience, in light of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, done in partnership with other academic disciplines, which leads to union with God, wisdom, and transforming action. This chapter refines the concept of Practical Spiritual Theology, exploring additional interpretive realities between Hilton's theological context and the contexts of the present.

The Nature of Truth

Hilton, like most medieval writers, wrote in such a way that interpreted truth in an absolute sense. This is in contradistinction to relativist notions of truth that would have probably seemed problematic and dangerous to Hilton. Contemporary scholars, like Thomas Groome, touting the contextual limits of knowledge and knowledge production, have been more reluctant to embrace any absolute notions of truth.¹⁹⁷ Practical Spiritual Theology may adopt a middle way between the absolute and the relativist: a contextual

¹⁹⁶“Spirituality is the lived reality, whereas spiritual theology is the systematic reflection and formalization of that reality.” Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 16.

¹⁹⁷ “Principles of truth and value are not to be conceived as transcendent eternal realities, but as provisional – yet binding – strategies of normative action and community within which shared commitments might be negotiated and put to work.” Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 7.

approach to truth.¹⁹⁸ That is something may said to be true within a particular setting, but not necessarily another. This possibility was not foreign to Hilton, at least as it related to the advice he gave. At the end of book one of Hilton’s premier work, *The Scale of Perfection*, he writes, “Also, not all these words that I write to you concern a person in active life, but they are for you or someone else who has the state of contemplative life.”¹⁹⁹ However, Hilton’s theology clearly rests on dogmatic foundations, which he would not see as being only “contextually” true. The particular ways in which Christians respond to the absolute truth of God and the Christian faith may vary by circumstance, but the truths themselves remain constant – at least in Hilton’s understanding.

It could be argued that Hilton’s spiritual theology is true, but only as it relates to those within the context of his time, the context of pursuing the spiritual life in the pattern of the three states of life, and within the context of the grammar or language of faith that made sense in fourteenth century England. This argument is a serious one and the result of future research on Hilton may reveal that Hilton’s approach does not ring true to the experience of all contemporary Christians. Or as discussed in the following chapter, it may be discovered that Hilton’s approach needs re-contextualizing in order for it to be true to the contemporary context.²⁰⁰ A more radical hermeneutic could question Hilton’s entire project as misguided. If all divine-discourse is human generated, and thus there is

¹⁹⁸“It only makes sense to talk about reality-for-us, and questions about what’s real or true make sense only within a socially constructed cluster of categories and an always-contested set of criteria for assessment.” Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), loc. 188. Kindle.

¹⁹⁹ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 160.

²⁰⁰ My assumption and my initial research confirm that Hilton continues to “generate meaningful and worthwhile understanding even though understanding has to vigilantly re-examined and renewed in the light of the always-moving horizon of the present.” Nancy Moules et al., *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 48.

no reliable way of knowing whether Hilton speaks for God or whether there is a God, then Hilton and the tradition he represents is at a best a historical curiosity and at worst an example of superstition and delusion.

To adopt these latter views might seem reasonable to some modern and academic perspectives, but such a posture would miss some of the central claims of the Christian faith. While much modern theology is skeptical, hesitant, and halting about the reliability of revelation and Scripture, earlier periods of theology were not so hindered. Hilton's period featured a greater trust in revelation and Christian Tradition, by ordinary and academic theologians alike. Regardless, to take Hilton and his context seriously, it is necessary to take his worldview and approach seriously. As with Biblical interpretation, the sense of the text is often missed when interpreters ignore the original context of its setting or its clear sense because the interpreter does not share the same position on absolute truth or divine reality as the author.²⁰¹ At the least, Hilton's likely position of absolute truth and divine reality must be accounted for in seeking to understandings his writings. Methodologically, this work embraces a critical realist approach to truth. This critical realism assumes as a posture of faith, understood as a constant dialectic between the absolute truth of God and reality. These realities are beyond the full grasp of human

²⁰¹ In other words, even if Hilton and the Christian Tradition are mistaken about certain supernatural claims or facts about Jesus and the life of the Spirit, in order to understand the meaning and significance of their writings it is necessary to do so from within the context of their believing perspective. Hans Frei explores this theme as it applies to the Biblical text (but with some adaptations can also apply to other texts such as Hilton's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 130.

comprehension, without removing the possibility of true knowledge, as known in context.²⁰²

The Nature of Revelation

Revelation for Hilton was dogmatically rooted in certain truth claims, able to be experientially expressed, and meditated through a medieval linguistic-culture.²⁰³ *The Scale of Perfection* gives substantial treatment to all three areas of religion. Hilton would insist that the experience of the spiritual life and what he terms, “reforming in faith,” are rooted in propositional truths that reflect reality and are not merely cultural-linguistic ways of making sense of the Christian experience. None the less, the affective dimensions of religion are at the heart of much of his advice. His entire project also assumes an entire grammar of faith and indeed an entire culture of faith reflecting the contemporary practice of Christian life in his time and setting. For Hilton, there is no question that the experiences of the spiritual life reflect revealed truth from God. Revelation, both within the Scripture and through the Holy Tradition, are understood by Hilton to be acts of God’s disclosure to humankind. They are not only human beings’ reflections on God.

Hilton recognizes that revelation is meditated through the Church and its teachings, but he would find the notion that we cannot encounter or experience God contrary to the entire mystical experience of the centuries before him and to the very

²⁰² Acknowledging the historically conditioned nature of revelation does “need to lead to subjectivism and skepticism. But it does at least demand a critical realism that joins our faith in the independent reality of what we see with an acknowledgment that our inescapably particular principles, concepts, and standpoints have, in fact, grown out of past historical experiences in our communities.” Douglas F. Ottati, introduction to *The Meaning of Revelation* by H. Richard Niebuhr, ix-xxxii (Louisville: Westminster, 2006), xiii.

²⁰³ These categories are explored usefully and helpfully in George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. 25th Anniversary Edition (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2009).

purposes of which he writes. Hilton, unlike the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*,²⁰⁴ is not a proponent of the *via negativa*. The way of negation new popularity may be related to contemporary scholarship's hesitation about truth claims. Hilton is a proponent of the *via affirmativa* or the *kataphatic tradition*, which places greater trust in God's revelatory ability to communicate with us through the mediums of our realities. This can and should be understood as a sacramental way of understanding reality and revelation.²⁰⁵

Hilton lived prior to the time of modernity. This gives him a freedom that late modern and early post-modern interpreters do not possess. However, the work of theologians, like Thomas Groom and others, can bring modern and post-modern considerations to Hilton in enriching ways. For example, revelation was communicated through fallible human beings. Thus, revelation itself becomes questionable as a reliable means of accessing the divine, divine truth, and divine will. One option that is frequently taken is to view revelation, whether in the Bible or in mystical revelations (like those of Hilton's contemporary Julian of Norwich), as second order reflections on divine experience. Some go further and view such writings as merely psychological expressions of ultimate concerns embodied in the superstitious cultural language of their time. Thus, these writings may be more useful in telling us about people's beliefs about God than telling us anything about God.

²⁰⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing* was sometimes mistakenly assumed to be written by Hilton. However, Hilton is not a proponent of this work's apophatic tradition. For a discussion of this work and Hilton's and their differences see Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time*, 17; 91.

²⁰⁵ Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time*, 92-93. "Most Christian theology" (at least classically) is "affirmative." "Based, most fundamentally, upon the belief that God has revealed himself, and uses creatures as vehicles for his self-disclosure." "In its most developed form, the Christian via affirmativa yields a sacramental view of the universe, a vision which sees the whole world as a communicating symbol of the divine."

The approach of Practical Spiritual Theology is to recognize that revelation, while mediated through human beings and human culture, is from God; that is a faith posture, which can be tested to some degree, but not ultimately proven or discredited. Yet revelation, whether from Scripture or other sources, must be recognized as being embedded in personal, cultural, and ideological settings. This recognition does not necessarily have to be interpreted as lessening the power of revelation, for interpretation can be understood as an enriching, clarifying process versus having to be deluding and misleading one.²⁰⁶

Sacred Scripture

Hilton makes abundant use of, reference to, and allusion toward the Holy Scriptures. He understood Scripture as a means of revelation, but also approaches Scripture as a man of the Church. Scriptural interpretation and relevance for Hilton is communally based. This reflects the normative interpretive role of the Church's hierarchy and more broadly (and more specifically) the authoritative role of various teachers on the spiritual life over the centuries. This might be understood as a saintly authority alongside that of the Church's official teachings. For Hilton, there is no tension between these two interpretive spheres. Hilton's exposure to Scripture, like that of many of his readers, would have been primarily through the liturgical life of the Church. Scripture was inspired for Hilton, but modern notions of infallibility would have been somewhat foreign to him. He would have granted the truthfulness of various Scriptural accounts, but

²⁰⁶ "Theology, therefore, is not to be conceived as something static, like a deposit, or a sum-total of knowledge- but as something dynamic, a practice, a process, a labor, a production." Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 32.

being a follower of Augustine and a medieval, he did not have difficulty with recognizing texts as sometimes having a primarily allegorical or metaphorical meaning.

The rise of Biblical criticism means that contemporary interpreters of Hilton have to reckon with both, how Hilton and his time interpreted Scripture and to wrestle with the meaning of Scripture today in light of recent developments. The medieval understanding of Scripture, being the Church's book and needing to be interpreted within the faith community, finds some cognates today.²⁰⁷ Hilton would not have shared the critical questioning of Scriptural truth that necessarily concerns much contemporary scholarship. Hilton was more concerned with how the vast tapestry of faith (Scripture, Tradition, and the experience of faith over the centuries) related to the spiritual life than picking the tapestry apart to see who threaded which part, which threads are authentic, and so on. From a devotional and formative point of view, Hilton's approach has much to commend it. Practical Spiritual Theology recognizes the embodied nature of Scripture, how its context influences its meaning, and how our context may perhaps challenge certain readings or require a reconceptualization of them in light of contemporary experience.

Tradition

Hilton's work has been described as a "summa of the spiritual life." His own writings – like so many of the great spiritual writers over the centuries – are immersed in the wider tradition of the Church, to the point that it is difficult at times to separate Hilton's voice from the voice of his predecessors, contemporaries, and even Holy Scripture. This is an affirmation of the communal approach to spirituality and theology

²⁰⁷ "The Bible must be taken in connection with the institution and perpetuity of a visible Church." Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Crossroads, 2006), 167.

that Hilton embraced.²⁰⁸ Notions of individual spiritual quests – very popular today – would have seemed foreign, misguided, and dangerous to Hilton. Hilton, after a career as a lawyer, felt a religious calling and attempted to live as a hermit, but ultimately became an Augustinian Canon at the Priory community in Thurgarton. Yet even the solitary tradition, which was extremely strong in England during his time, was immersed in a communal understanding of the Christian life. Tradition for Hilton was not merely custom, but the movement of the Holy Spirit across the centuries, particularly as embodied in the life and teachings of the saints. Hilton refers more to these saintly authorities, an authority that comes from holiness, more than he does the hierarchy of the Church. Again, in his citations of both authorities, he writes of no conflict. Perhaps, it might be said that the saintly doctors of the Church are for Hilton a more appropriate resource for the Christian life because they address the challenges of that life from their own experience and the inherited wisdom of those before them; which indeed, is exactly what Hilton does himself.

Christianity was never monolithic, but since Hilton's time it has become more diverse, especially after the Reformation. Hilton lived in a time that was anticipating the Reformation in some respects but was still immersed in a Western Catholic Christianity that had few challengers. Like with Scripture, contemporary scholars are aware of the fallibility of tradition, the perspectival nature of tradition, and the power dynamics inherent in determining what was orthodox and what was not. This can lead to a similar skepticism about the Church's Tradition and whether it is to be understood as a conduit

²⁰⁸ “This is why community of believers contains an essential, indispensable, explicit supplement with regard to the church as an association. Without this supplement, the church runs the risk of being reduced to a socio-cultural association.” Johannes van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 43.

of the Holy Spirit or merely a conduit for the agendas of the Church's official power brokers understanding of God. In addition, Hilton lived on the fading edge of a period when theology was mostly an ecclesial practice. The sharp distinction between academic theology and ecclesial theology was just beginning to develop with the rise of the universities. Further, Hilton's choice to write in the vernacular fueled his status as a best seller among literate lay people, clergy, and religious and, contributed to the practice of ordinary theology.²⁰⁹ Practical Spiritual Theology seeks to bring together the three major strands of theology: the academic, the ecclesial,²¹⁰ and the ordinary. Practical Spiritual Theology seeks to bring into conversation the classically ecclesial based discipline of spiritual theology with the academic approach of practical theology while engaging with the experience of ordinary believers. This means bringing both a positivist faith approach to Tradition, but also a critical perspective that will allow for potential re-shaping, reformulating, or dismissing of certain elements of spiritual theology in light of contemporary contexts and concerns.

²⁰⁹ "Ordinary Christian theology is my phrase for the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind." Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Surrey, UK: Asgate Publishing, 2002), 56.

²¹⁰ I define ecclesial theology as theology done within the life of the Christian community from explicitly dogmatic, normative, and prescriptive perspectives (This not the same thing as systematic theology, as much ecclesial theology, as found in sermons, devotional writings, Bible studies, does not reflect the academic categories of that discipline). Ecclesial theology may bear some resemblances to local theologies (see Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985). Hilton would be an example of this. Hilton is not an academic theologian. He is also not an ordinary theologian. His approach is rooted in the experience, life, practice, and doctrine of the Church. My own project of Practical Spiritual Theology owes some debt to the identification of ecclesial theology and the gap between it and academic theology from: Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). Their argument needs some nuancing and some greater rigor, but their major premise that theology has become divorced from the life of the Church has some painful truth. My hope is that Practical Spiritual Theology can be a means for bringing together theologians from all three social locations and for encouraging theologians in all three social locations to be in active dialogue and partnership with one another.

Hilton. Spiritual theology can be found in both Western and Eastern Christianity. Practical Spiritual Theology is anchored in the Western Tradition without ignoring the East and the ways in which the two traditions have influenced each other, especially regarding mysticism.²¹¹ The project of Practical Spiritual Theology can potentially open dialogue between the stores of ancient wisdom of the Church as found in her spiritual writers and mystics with contemporary believers. It is necessary to begin somewhere, and this work begins with Walter Hilton. Hilton is the initial test case and the conversation partner that will help to develop a Practical Spiritual Theology that in the future could be used with other spiritual writers and mystics.

Hilton's "summa" approach to the spiritual life makes him a useful conversation partner because he embodies, summarizes, and distills much of the best teaching on the spiritual life up to his time. In addition, within the academic literature Hilton is a minor figure. He is often mentioned alongside his more famous and greatly written about contemporary, Julian of Norwich. Also, Hilton's use of Scripture lends himself to Protestant audiences and his immersion in the classic sacramental life of the Church lends himself to Catholic audiences. Practical Spiritual Theology intends to be an ecumenical project resourcing the spiritual lives of Christians in various Western traditions.

The Role of the Social Sciences

One of the unique and controversial aspects of practical theology has been its embrace of the social sciences. The social sciences provide a "thick description" of various social contexts and realities to which theology can then reflect upon. As the discipline has developed over the last decades, the synthesis between social science and

²¹¹ Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: City Press, 1993).

theology has become more fluid, more organic, and more integrated. Practical Spiritual Theology can be understood as a sub-discipline of Practical Theology, which brings together classic spiritual theology into conversation with the experience of contemporary Christians in dialogue with other disciplines such as spirituality studies, psychology, psychology of religion, and Christian psychology among others.²¹²

Spiritual theology can be understood as being dogmatic, rooted as it is in the Church's teaching, but can be understood as a pre-modern expression of practical theology. Hilton's teachings for example, are rooted in the Church's dogmatic teaching, but are also grounded in his experience, the experience of his directees, and the experience of centuries of mystics, spiritual teachers, and writers. One difference between Practical Spiritual Theology and spirituality studies or the psychology of religion is that Practical Spiritual Theology is rooted in the ecclesial and oriented toward a normative and prescriptive practice of the spiritual life, not merely the study of such a life.

Social sciences research methods, particularly its qualitative ones, are powerful tools in the development of a Practical Spiritual Theology. In particular, interviews, case studies, group observation, and participation will provide concrete and academically sound ways of bringing the ancient wisdom of the Christian Tradition, such as that found

²¹² John Milbank's warning that "scientific and social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise" is pertinent to the development of a Practical Spiritual Theology (see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 3. These concerns have been fruitfully explored, debated, and theologized in the conversation around the relationship between psychology and Christianity. Within the discourse of that conversation Practical Spiritual Theology can be seen as an example of "Christian Psychology" or at least a close sister of that project. My own research would likely benefit (and I think) those committed to the development of a Christian psychology could benefit from a mutual conversation. A good introduction to his discourse is found in Eric Johnson, ed., *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

in Hilton, into contact with contemporary Christians.²¹³ Since one of the goals of Practical Spiritual Theology is wisdom, qualitative studies are better suited to discover, express, and record the wisdom that emerges from particular people in particular settings. Quantitative methods may have their place, especially once enough qualitative research has been completed to note trends and potential principles that may have relevance across contexts.

²¹³ The various tools and perspectives developed by congregational studies are useful in the research and development of Practical Spiritual Theology. Since future research will likely focus on Christians who are active (at some level) in the life of the Church congregational research methods will likely be employed. Such as those found in Helen Cameron, et al., *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2005). Also, it is possible that future dissertation research on Hilton could be congregationally oriented. An entire congregation could be exposed to Hilton over a period of time and the effects researched. Even a broader approach which might involve retreats or presentations to numerous congregations will need to pay some attention to the individual participants' congregational affiliations and activity.

CHAPTER FIVE. WALTER HILTON AND CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

Walter Hilton and Contemporary Christians in Southwell, England

The goal of practical spiritual theology is to do spiritual theology through the writings of a specific mystic and put those writings into conversation with the experiences of contemporary believers. As explored earlier, this method includes bringing a mystic into dialogue with either a contemporary theologian, contemporary sociological research, or both. The goal of sociological research is to bring a mystic's teachings into conversation with contemporary believers. This results in an empirically grounded Practical Spiritual Theology.

Walter Hilton lived and died at the Augustinian priory in Thurgarton, England. Knowledge of Hilton is limited, as the author discovered during three research trips, taken in three consecutive years to Thurgarton. The village of Thurgarton remains, including St. Peter's, a small but active Church of England parish, which is on the site of the original medieval priory and includes architecture from Hilton's time. Despite a memorial plaque and image of Hilton on one of the church's pillars, few are familiar with his teachings. To the north, less than four miles, is the small city of Southwell,²¹⁴ which includes the historic Minster Church.²¹⁵ The Minster was a significant center in the fourteenth century. It is likely that Hilton visited the Minster either occasionally or regularly depending on his duties at the priory church in Thurgarton.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Southwell is a city of approximately 7000 individuals located in Nottinghamshire County, approximately three hours north of London.

²¹⁵ Minster is a term given to certain English Churches with historic monastic foundations. Southwell Minster is also the Cathedral Church for the Anglican Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham.

²¹⁶ This is a guess based on the importance and proximity of the Minster (Southwell) and Priory (Thurgarton) in the 14th century.

Method and Location of Research. The experience of getting to know the region and the leadership of the Minster in Southwell, including the parish church in Thurgarton, led the author to conduct semi-structured small group interviews in Southwell. These took place during a fourth trip to the region in May 2019. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to emphasize the experience of contemporary Christians in Southwell. Some participants volunteered, while others were drawn from the Minster congregation, which draws individuals from across the city and out into the rural areas that extend to Thurgarton and beyond. The leadership of the Minster, especially the Dean, Canon Theologian, and Retreat House Wardens, helped to facilitate these interviews. They were held at the Sacrista Prebend Retreat House, which is across the street from the Minster. Since the author's first trip, the leadership of the retreat house have been extremely supportive of the research project. One of the rooms, where the author has resided during every trip, is named after Walter Hilton. The plan was to conduct three semi-structured group interviews. No volunteers came to the first scheduled group. However, the second and third groups were well attended.

The protocol used semi-structured small group interviews with five movements. The goal was to ensure the exploration of certain topics while keeping the conversation as open-ended and in-depth as possible. It was expected that respondents would provide data on some of these topics without being asked, particularly the sub-questions in the protocol. Standard neutral follow-ups, such as "tell me more," were used wherever applicable. The questions were constructed to move from initial rapport-building questions (that helped put the respondents at ease) to a sequencing of questions. Such sequences were designed to move from the present and toward the past and future, from

the impersonal to the personal, and from participants' personal experience to reflections on the possibilities for others within the wider Church.²¹⁷ The questions in abbreviated form were:

1. When you think of spirituality or mysticism today, what comes to mind?
2. What do you think about the three states of life, starting with the contemplative, but also considering the active and mixed as Hilton described them?
3. As means to contemplation Hilton recommended the reading of Holy Scripture, meditation, and diligent prayer. How do you imagine these three practices might help people in their relationship with God?
4. Hilton recommended moderation in bodily and spiritual practices, how might they relate to your own faith and spirituality?
5. How might Hilton and his teachings be a help to the spiritual life of Christians today?²¹⁸

Contemporary Christian Response to Walter Hilton

First Movement: Opening. Each semi-structured interview began with a question, worded similarly to, “We’ve gathered here in the land where Hilton is from, one of the great spiritual teachers of the English mystical tradition, whose insights and teachings may offer something important for our time. Let’s begin thinking about spirituality and mysticism in general. When you think of mysticism today, what comes to mind?” Group participants shared a variety of answers: “Sense of God, silence,

²¹⁷ See Appendix I for the full interview protocol

²¹⁸ To see the full script, see the Appendix.

participating in the being of God, being aware of the influence of the Spirit,” and more. More than one individual in each group brought up the idea of “otherworldliness.”

Otherworldliness tied to the idea of there being “something else,” something more than the material. One participant expressed it as, “Untouchable, something you can’t touch.” Another participant stressed the necessity of individuals having an openness to this other reality in order to experience it. When prompted about how individuals could experience this sense of otherworldliness, participants suggested art and nature. One group associated mysticism with particular places, such as “Iona and Northumberland.” Several shared experiences of going to retreat centers, older churches, or places of great natural beauty that facilitate a mystical awareness of God. One participant suggested, “A peaceful place, a place that takes you out of the hustle and bustle. That could be a spiritual or mystical place.” The participant identified the priory church, where Hilton lived, as such a place. This participant stated, “And actually Thurgarton is rather like that. It’s very lovely when you do down there, and it’s very peaceful.” Participants named prayer as a means of experiencing something mystical or bringing a greater awareness of God. One participant also wanted to add “social political commitment to justice” as a means for encountering the presence of God.

One group discussed the terms mystic and contemplative. This group was uncomfortable with individuals identifying themselves as mystics. One participant said, “It sounds a bit boastful if I’m honest. Some people have said things like that and immediately I have alarm bells.” Another participant agreed adding, “Hotlines to God can be very dangerous.” The importance of a mystic or contemplative having

accountability and experience with a wider community was mentioned. Julian of Norwich was given as an example, for while she was an anchoress in a cell, she was also attached to a church community and regularly engaged with individuals seeking spiritual guidance at her window. Speaking of Hilton, a participant said, “But in the community he would also experience a collective mysticism.” Several participants also thought that many Christians have experienced moments of mystical encounter, such as prayer without words and more, but would not identify themselves as mystics. Thus, it might be important to use other terms (such as contemplative) or define the terms mystic and mysticism when working with individuals or groups. One participant offered the following definition of a mystic, which received much interest and affirmation from the group, “A mystic is someone who is open to the unknowability of God.”

Second Movement: Hilton and The Three States of Christian Life. The second movement of the conversation shifted to the following question and concern, narrated similarly as,

For Hilton, and the larger spiritual tradition of which he was a part, the goal of the Christian life was union with God. For centuries before Hilton, it was thought that the best way to pursue union with God was by becoming a contemplative, a monk or nun, and retreating from the world in order to devote oneself fully to prayer and contemplation. This contrasted with the majority of Christians, who were actives, with responsibilities in the world that prevented them from seriously seeking union with God. Hilton emphasized the possibility of a mixed life that is neither fully contemplative nor fully active, but a mixture.

This mixed way opens the door for Christians living in the world to pursue union with God. What do you think about these three ways or states of life, starting with the contemplative, but also considering the active and mixed states, as he would have described them?

Both groups wrestled with making each of these states separate from the others. Several participants wanted to affirm the possibility that Christians participate in all three states at different times. One participant said, “Some people maintain that you can be contemplative and active at the same time.” Another participant challenged the traditional idea that union with God was only, ordinarily, obtainable via the contemplative state, “Sorry. I would question the union with God, as being only available if you retreat from the world.” Others affirmed this, which led to a discussion of Hilton’s view that contemplation, of a significant kind, was available to lay people living in the world, especially if they adopt the mixed life. Individuals in both groups also connected the three traditional states as being possibilities for different life seasons. That is, they tied the active life to the raising of children and early career efforts and the contemplative life to life in retirement and advanced age. Yet, the possibility for moments of contemplation remained for those in active states, “It was sort of going through your day with everything being part of a prayer or experience, which for a number of us who at the time, and young children, was a big impact on our lives.”

Participants agreed, that as modern people we are less comfortable with strong demarcations between the states of life. At the same time, after giving greater definition to the states of life, especially as Hilton and other medieval understood them, both

groups recognized that the active life and mixed life are for most Christians. Prayer (the Jesus Prayer was mentioned more than once), silence, and retreat were mentioned as ways for active and mixed life Christians to engage in moments of contemplation, which help to sustain their active lives. Both groups mentioned the possibility of an individual joining a religious order as a way of embracing the contemplative life. In one group, different participants added that someone could “be a solitary” or “join one of the enclosed communities.” The group discussed how Hilton had tried the solitary approach of being a hermit before joining a community. Several participants affirmed the importance of being called to the contemplative life. This sentiment was voiced by a participant stating, “I think if you say I want to become a contemplative, there must be something stirring in you to actually move you down that road, [a] working in you of the Holy Spirit.”

Both groups raised the topic of whether clergy were called to the contemplative life. One group discussed this in greater detail. Clergy participants and non-clergy participants struggled with this idea. Participants saw the ceaseless activity that characterizes the life of many clergy as an obstacle to living a life of contemplation, especially in the traditional state as understood by Hilton and other writers.

Traditionally, a life of contemplation meant withdrawal from the world. Almost by definition, clergy today are set apart and tasked to be active among people. The possibility of a mixed life for clergy, as Hilton and others envisioned, was still seen as challenging to realize in practice. Both groups discussed the need for the Church to create more space for silence and contemplation. Otherwise, according to participants, those with contemplative leanings will not come into faith communities or will not find

an answer to their internal yearnings for contemplation within the Christian faith. One participant added, “I just wonder if Christianity hasn’t got too little contemplation to draw people.”

Third Movement: Hilton and the Means of Contemplation. The third movement of the interviews was framed using a question similar to, “Hilton, and the spiritual tradition of his time, saw the principal work of Christians in the active way as that of charity, understood as love of neighbor. The principal work of contemplatives was different and focused on specifically seeking union with God. He recommends three means or practices of contemplation: (1) The reading of Holy Scripture, (2) meditation, and (3) diligent prayer with devotion. How do you imagine these three practices might help people to achieve union with God?”

One group explored the concept of Scriptural reading as meditating, thinking carefully and imaginatively over a text, versus more contemporary understandings of meditation as a clearing of the mind. One participant shared how her own experience of developing a regular practice of reading Scripture was helpful to her, “It was so relevant to some of the stuff that I’m going through or have been going through.” The participant added, referring to Scripture reading and study, that “very much about it helped me to become more contemplative.” This same group had an extended conversation about the role of Scripture in different Anglican traditions. One participant shared, “the practice within a low evangelical church is to read scripture...spend half an hour having a quiet time...was something that was a real habit and part of your Christian journey.” The same participant shared that through this practice, “God was revealing to you” and then you were “Listening and waiting on God.”

In terms of prayer, both groups discussed the important of praying with others. A participant shared, “Some people can find it easy to do on their own. I find it better in a group, because I’m not disciplined enough to do it on my own.” One group contrasted prayer with devotion, as prayer was “just mechanical.” Another participant added that prayer with devotion would be “Not doing it because you’re meant to.” That is, not simply praying because it is an obligation. The Jesus prayer was mentioned again as a type of prayer that is “actually practicing standing in Jesus’ presence.” This being the purpose and focus of contemplative practice.

One group further explored the importance of community in pursuing a contemplative life by asking, “Whether these three dimensions of contemplation should be individual as well as collective.” This brought back the previously discussed idea of “collective mysticism.” At first, different religious orders were given as examples of communities of collective contemplation. However, the group then discussed how these practices are present, at least in part, when Christians gather, in “Bible study” and “liturgy.” As one participant said, “It’s happening in every structure.” The fact that these three means of contemplation are offered in many Christian gatherings, especially liturgical, was recognized as being true, while also recognized as not being something the average worshipper is intentionally engaging. The question of the Eucharist as a means of contemplation was raised. It was discussed that the Eucharist was not a focus of his writings, though he makes passing reference to the sacrament of the Penance and the Eucharist in some of his writings. Lastly, a participant suggested, “I could experience God through nature.” Earlier, both groups discussed this as a possibility.

Fourth Movement: Hilton and Moderation in the Spiritual Life. The fourth movement of the interviews was framed using the following question, Walter Hilton wrote that, “For with regard to your bodily nature, it is good to use discretion in eating, drinking, and sleeping, and in every kind of bodily penance: either in prolonged vocal prayer or in bodily feeling from great fervor of devotion – as in weeping or the like and in spiritual imagining as well, when one feels no grace. In all these kinds of work it is good to keep discretion, perhaps by breaking off sometimes; for moderation is best.”²¹⁹ What does this mean to you? How does it relate to the practice of your faith and spirituality?

Both groups identified the word moderation and affirmed it as wise counsel. One group moved from moderation in eating to gratitude in eating, “When you were eating, you think about what it is you’re eating, maybe where it was grown, the people who picked it, harvested it, transported it, and then got into shops.” The other group moved into a consideration of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, “Moderation is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, isn’t it?” The discussion connected self-control with moderation.²²⁰ One participant said, “I think we have a word for it today, which is holistic and balance.” This same group made connections with moderation and Hilton’s counsel to the idea of discretion, “He’s also thinking of discretion in the other direction, that you don’t want to overdo certain kinds of ascetic practices.” In reply to this comment, another participant added, “Don’t torture yourself in other words.” Mindfulness was also seen as related to or made possible by moderation, “It’s almost

²¹⁹ Clark and Dorward, *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, 96.

²²⁰ Galatians 5:22-23: “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

like mindfulness about everything that you do and then as part of that being aware, not concentrating on yourself all the time, but being aware of when something may need adjusting or confessing or something like that.” A participant in the other group brought up the idea of moderation as being a particularly English trait. The group resonated with this, “One of them was moderation in all things, things we say about ourselves. Moderation in all things. And I suppose that’s how Anglicans would view ourselves, isn’t it? Moderate in all things.”

Fifth Movement: Conclusion. The fifth and final movement of the interviews involved the following questions, “How might Walter Hilton and his teachings, be a resource or help to the spiritual life today? What might be some helpful ways to connect people with Hilton and his teachings?” Both groups felt they did not know enough about Hilton to answer this question as fully as they would have liked. They acknowledged that knowledge of Hilton was scarce, even in the land of Hilton, “Now if you were to ask most English people, including people who live around here, they would not know who he was.” One participant shared, “I was hoping that one of the things when we met now is to hear from you.” However, each group also had responses to how Hilton could be a resource for Christians in their own vicinity and more widely. They point to Hilton’s teaching as encouraging a “rhythm of life” leading to a “rich life.” A participant stated, “If you want to enjoy the richness of life, you need moderation.” One group asked the author to contribute ways in which Hilton might be a resource. The author offered several suggestions. All of which were affirmed by the group, but especially Hilton’s view that lay people could develop a serious spirituality, the concept of the spiritual life being akin to a fire requiring kindling, and how Hilton’s

writings provide, in a short space, a good entry into the spiritual theology of the centuries leading up to his time. There was some discussion about the changing social climate in Britain and the sense of unease that some are experiencing. One participant shared that Hilton might be a resource, “Britain as a country is searching for something.”

The continued interest in alternative spiritualities was discussed. Hilton was seen as a Christian resource for those seeking a deeper spirituality. Another participant echoed this sense by saying, “It seems as though he’s trying to draw Christians into a state of being...that would be useful today, because for a lot of Christians, Christianity is a state of doing.” One group spent some time discussing the need for local observances and resources: a brochure to give pilgrims to Thurgarton and Southwell, a Hilton day, and an icon of Hilton (there is no current icon of him to anyone’s knowledge). The participants discussed the need for a popular and more general commentary on Hilton’s works. Several of the participants said his writings were difficult to understand, even in the contemporary translations. For example, one participant said, “It’s quite difficult to read his own writings, because it’s so kind of style of writing that it’s got its own rhythm.” Others suggested that podcasts or audio readings of books might be another way for people to engage with Hilton’s writings and teachings. Walking is a popular pastime in the region, and it was suggested, “The Hilton walk, add it to our local long walks.” A walking pilgrimage from the Minster in Southwell to Thurgarton has been happening the last couple of years. The thought is to have this route put into an official map and leaflet and distribute it widely.

Reflection on Research Approach

The group discussions were fruitful. They indicate the potential for further empirical research within practical spiritual theology. At least two additional discussions groups would have made for a fuller research sample and experience. Also, participants in both groups shared their wish to know more about Walter Hilton. More familiarity with Hilton among the participants could have made these discussions richer. This could have been done informally by asking the participants to have read a preparatory paper about Hilton, read one of his books and discussed it informally, or by having the researcher do a presentation about Hilton before each of the semi-structured group interviews. While this would likely result in greater engagement with Hilton and his ideas, it might have discouraged participants from sharing more of their own experiences. Also, gaining more broader permission to utilize the many conversations the researcher had with individuals and groups about Walter Hilton and the spiritual life during the last research trip, if not previous trips, would have provided a wealth of insight and data.

In the future, using Groom's five movements of Christian Praxis²²¹ explicitly in research is envisioned. This approach would address some of the weaknesses outlined above and the desire of all participants to know more about Walter Hilton before engaging in the semi-structured interviews. The focusing activity could involve a very brief introduction to Walter Hilton as a man of prayer. The first movement could invite participants to name and reflect on their own practice of prayer. The second movement could invite participants to reflect more critically on their lives of prayer by challenging

²²¹ Focusing activity. Movements: 1) Naming/Expressing Present Praxis. 2) Critical Reflection on Present Action 3) Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision 4) Dialectical Hermeneutic to Appropriate Christian Story/Vision to Participants' Stories and Visions 5) Decision/Response for Living Christian Faith.

them to define prayer, the reasons why they pray, what they hope prayer will accomplish and so forth. The third movement could present Walter Hilton as a teacher of prayer and the spiritual life. Further biographical information would be given, but the heart of this movement would be presenting a select number of his teachings on the spiritual life. The fourth movement would encourage participants to reflect on their own experience of prayer and the spiritual life in light of Hilton and his teachings. The fifth movement could lead to a series of intentions, new awareness, or steps the participants intend to take in their lives of prayer. Also, this movement could identify potential areas or ideas that might develop into new spiritual theologies, born out of the dialectical wisdom between Hilton and the participants. While not possible or advisable in every research project, a longer project could extend these sessions over a long period of time, following participants efforts at implementing new intentions and in developing the details of new practical spiritual theologies.

Tentative Practical Spiritual Theologies

From their own experiences, participants shared many valuable insights into the spiritual life that could be helpful for other Christians today. In addition, their responses to Hilton were illuminative, especially regarding aspects of his teaching that might be helpful to others. Several ideas the group discussed could be further developed into theological practices, reflections, and guidance that could resource the spiritual lives of Christians today. Three will be explored here that bear particular attention and could form the basis of further writing and research.

Collective Mysticism. The idea that Hilton would have experienced a collective mysticism by living in community at the Augustinian priory in Thurgarton was

mentioned more than once. Many mystics over the centuries lived in a religious community. This is not always clear by reading their writings. For example, in all of Hilton's works he is writing to individuals. The group thought of Hilton's sharing in the common life of prayer and sacrament as providing an atmosphere conducive to the experience of God. A practical spiritual theology of collective mysticism could be developed providing guidelines for those seeking to develop their life of prayer and their life with God. Much of Hilton's counsel, even to solitaries, points to the necessity of the community, specifically the Church. Hilton's counsels could be reflected on, adapted for contemporary Christians, and with specific groups empirically researched and reflected upon.

From States of Life to Stages of Life. Both groups had wondered about the medieval concept of a state of life as being lifelong. They did not deny that some are clearly called to the active life, the mixed life, and the contemplative life, but they wondered if these states of life, might also be conceived of as stages of life. An exploration of each state of life and how it might relate to human seasons of life could develop a practical spiritual theology of life development from ascetical and mystical theological perspectives. This approach could be liberating and sustaining for individual Christians and Christian communities as they explicitly name the states and helped individuals live them and prepare for future stages. For example, many of the participants thought of the contemplative life as being a potentially enriching and life changing focus for adults in the third season of life. Likewise, those in the first season of life could find help and structure in the traditional emphasizes of the active life. For example, the young mother should not feel guilt for not spending an hour in silent

prayer everyday but could intentionally embrace her present season of life, as aligning with the active state, where the chief work is of loving God and neighbor, where a life of prayer may be in shorter bursts or more on the go.

Contemplative Evangelization. One participant wondered whether present day churches were quiet enough to draw people who might be inclined to the contemplative state. One group also mentioned the importance of churches making time for silence in their worship services. A practical spiritual theology of contemplative evangelism could be developed by engaging in research and reflection about where people seek out silence already and how the church can participate in, mirror, or offer similar opportunities (e.g. libraries, yoga classes, etc.). The use of silence in worship could also be explored and specifically how individuals encounter and respond to silence in worship. Formal research could be done with silent prayer groups as well as those who have never practiced any form of silent prayer, but who, throughout the course of the study, begin to do so. The idea of evangelizing culture by providing space for reflection, silence, and stillness has implications for church architecture, art, music, worship, schedules, and more.²²²

²²² Some contemplative considerations for evangelism are explored in the following work: Elaine Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

CHAPTER SIX. THE PROJECT OF PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

An Emerging Approach to Contemporary Spiritual Theology

Christianity claims that the present is persuasive. The faith that was lived yesterday, must be lived today. The context and content of the past differs from the present. This necessitates a faith that has continuity with the past as well as orientation toward the future. Navigating the present moment faithfully requires wisdom. Practical Spiritual Theology seeks to retrieve the wisdom of mystics, like Walter Hilton, for the spiritual lives of Christians today. Spiritual theology in the Western Christian Tradition has defined the goal of the spiritual life as a pursuit of perfection through the three-fold way of purgation, illumination, and union. For centuries, writers like Hilton have guided individuals seeking encounter and experience with God. Their wisdom is derived from revelation, the Church's teaching, their own experience, as well as others in living a serious life of prayer and contemplation. Seekers of spirituality and faith, as well as church leaders, have given these mystics a special authority. An authority born of holiness, experience with the divine, and experience in guiding others. They are witnesses, like a bonfire on a dark winter's night, to the reality of God.

Walter Hilton, a 14th century, English mystic, proved to be an excellent first case study for the development of Practical Spiritual Theology. His major writings are accessible in good English translations. He is often referred to in discussions of medieval English spirituality but is not a major figure like his near contemporary Julian of Norwich. His writings are systematic, covering a wide range of topics related to the spiritual life. He innovated by opening the door for serious spirituality not only for the contemplative, but for lay people in the world with active responsibilities. This aspect of

his teaching proved attracted in the research groups and in many conversations the researcher has had with individuals and groups about Hilton over the last four years. The fact that parts of priory where he lived, died, and wrote most of his major works is still in existence as a Church of England parish in Thurgarton, UK, enriched this experience greatly. This physical reminder of Hilton has contributed to a vague awareness of him in the village and to the north in the small city of Southwell.

Practical Spiritual Theology combines the wisdom of past spiritual theology with the tools and insights of practical theology to develop, support, and resource the praxis of contemporary Christians today. Spiritual theology, especially in the forms written by Hilton and others, is inherently concerned with a way of life that is an embodiment of the truths of theology and the content of revelation. Hilton wrote to individuals whose interest in spiritual matters was not theoretical, nor casual, but personal and vocational. The contemplative nun he writes to in *The Scale* is actively seeking union with God. The secular lord he writes to in *The Mixed Life* is actively wrestling with whether he should lay aside his secular responsibilities, so that he can embrace a more contemplative life. Just as Hilton's guidance was tailored to the context and situation of his directees, so Practical Spiritual Theology develops practices, directives, and theologies oriented to specific individuals and communities. This is an essential component of this approach to spiritual theology, differentiating it from more recent approaches to spiritual direction and spirituality studies which have tended to be more therapeutic than theological.

Thomas Groome's model of Shared Christian Praxis proved to be unusually suited for the tasks of Practical Spiritual Theology. Originally, Groome was intended only to be a conversation partner with Hilton. Further reflection on the research revealed

Groome as offering critical components of a method and methodology for Practical Spiritual Theology. Groome's model encourages participants to move from a consideration of their life experience, to the story of Christian faith, and then back to their life experience. This helpfully situates the wisdom of the past with an orientation toward the present. The work of retrieval which is foundational to this work finds helpful cognates in Groome's centering the Christian story within the existential reality of participants. Narrative and story are central to the human experience and to the Christian Tradition. Many of the saints and mystics are known to us by stories, stories that inspire and encourage others along the path of faith. Practical Spiritual Theology recognizes the storied nature of the Christian life and seeks to help contemporary Christians connect their story with the story of past mystics and saints, in order to live lives of faith in the present.

Conative Mysticism. One of the most promising developments from this research is the concept of conative mysticism. This is a new way of understanding both mysticism as described by spiritual theology and, conation as described by Groome. This concept needs further development as one of the foundations of Practical Spiritual Theology. Conative mysticism promises to bring the intense concern of contemplative writers with the interior life and being to all aspects of life, encompassing both the personal and the social, the immanent and the transcendent. The individual seeking conative wisdom is a mystic seeking union with God or a life filled with God's love, which holistically transforms themselves and contributes to the transformation of others and the world. The spiritual life is not about me and God, but neither is it only about God and us. Practical Spiritual Theology posits that a healthy spirituality attends to the intrapersonal, and the

interpersonal, the psychological and the sociological. It also has the advantage of being unapologetic about the reality and centrality of God. So that other goods of the spiritual life such as better living, social justice, and flourishing congregations become means and not ends of the spiritual life. God remains the ultimate teleological alpha and omega²²³. Conative mystics, those seeking union and experience with God that transforms themselves and others are living examples of this teleology.

Practical Spiritual Theology and The Three Publics

Church. Practical Spiritual Theology is inherently ecclesial. Mystics, like Hilton, wrote from within the Church to others within the Church. The beliefs and practices they commend assume a whole Christian worldview and commitment. The work of retrieval will be important in helping contemporary Christians in wrestling with their own worldview and commitments and how these are shaped by their Christian faith as well as other influences. The development of the concept of conative mysticism may also help some in the Church see new value the mystics that they may have previously assessed as being too otherworldly. The Western Church's history is rich with mystical and spiritual writers. Individuals or teams of researchers could spend their lives developing new spiritual theologies based on dialectical engagement with past mystics and contemporary Christians. A focus on one mystic or a group of mystics could also be the focus of a scholar's career. For some mystics there is translation work to be done. For many there is the need for historical and theological reflection on their writings. Besides this, even

²²³ "Practical Theology does not deal with human action in general, either with the action of the believer nor the person who acts in the service of God, but specifically with action that has to do with the actualization and the maintenance of the relationship between God and humanity, and humanity with God." See: Heitnik Gerben, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 129.

mystics with relatively small corpuses could engage a scholar for a large part of their career if they engaged in extensive empirical research with groups of people over longer periods of time.

It will be helpful if some researchers engage the historic locales or cultures of given mystics. As with Walter Hilton and the Southwell region in England, this kind of engagement may help to revitalize or at least bring renewed attention to certain aspects of Christian spirituality, discipleship, and life. Over the course of the researcher's four years in traveling to and being in correspondence with individuals in Southwell, the awareness of Hilton has increased, along with a sense that more should be done to promote his life and teachings. Hilton's church is now listed on the site of the British Pilgrimage Trust. At least two walking pilgrimages from Southwell to Thurgarton have taken place during this time. There is still much to be done in promoting Hilton within the lands of Hilton, which illustrates that the fruits of practical spiritual theology will take time and that locals within given contexts will need to be inspired and equipped to carry on the long-haul of efforts to promote local mystics. Part of that inspiration and equipping may be the writing or creating of resources on practical spiritual theology that are accessible to laity and clergy alike. The need for these kind of resources on Walter Hilton was raised in the research groups and with the researcher during each trip to the region.

Society. Of course, Christians live as a people within various societies, but Practical Spiritual Theology must also speak to the public of society. Western societies secularization and the Church's institutional decline necessitate a spiritual theology that

embraces not only the so-called Benedict option²²⁴ but a Dominic option²²⁵ or to put it Hiltonian terms: a mixed option. An option that nurtures spiritualities and practices associated with all three states of life, and particularly the mixed as conceived by Hilton. A mixed option for Christian engagement in a secular-world might further develop the idea from the interviews of conceiving the three classic states of life (active, contemplative, mixed) as seasons of life. This mixed option might also develop the ideas of collective wisdom and contemplative evangelization also which emerged from the research groups. Conative mysticism may prove an attraction to Nones and those who Nancy Ammerman's research identifies as being extra-theistic. Despite the Church's decline, interest in spirituality, meditation, creation, and self-improvement remain high. Places like Southwell and Thurgarton, which have historic, attractive, and beautiful churches can combine their popularity as pilgrimage and tourist destinations with a promotion of local mystics and saints. This dual draw of historic building and historic personality may prove to be a powerful combination for creating channels of spiritual interest and practice going into congregations and out to their wider communities.

Work with individuals on the fringes and beyond the walls of the Church could be fruitful if approached from the perspective of Practical Spiritual Theology. Careful presentation of a mystic to a variety of groups may yield fruitful insights as to which aspects of traditional Christian spirituality resonate the most with the unchurched.

Further, this serious engagement with the spiritual life of outsiders may prove an

²²⁴ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

²²⁵ The Dominic option is the author's own counter vision to Dreher's which is essentially a mixed life option. Saint Dominic was an Augustinian Canon before he founded the Order of Preachers and the friars retained many elements of the religious life of canons.

effective means of contemplative evangelism on its own. Some participants in the Southwell region thought that Hilton might have something to offer the wider British culture. A research project could be undertaken with the express purpose of engaging those outside of the local churches in Nottinghamshire. Participants would be asked about their experience of spirituality, offering the experiences of Hilton, as a historical resident of the area, as a conversation partner. This local listening process to those outside of the faith or the boundaries of local churches could also prove a means of contemplative evangelism, drawing those beyond the walls inside the walls. Again, the presence of visible and historic buildings like Southwell Minster and the Priory Church in Thurgarton can help this work.

Bringing the wisdom of mystics and spiritual writers into dialogue with those beyond the Church may also help to contribute to a public theology of the spiritual life. Practical theology's ability to partner with other disciplines, such as sociology and psychology, may enable a public theology of the spiritual life to find a hearing among those who normally would not listen to the Church or individuals associated with the Christian faith. The interest in personal biography, especially of individuals who lived unusual lives is a cultural phenomenon. It is possible that certain mystics might prove attractive to those outside of the Church, giving them a vision of the Christian life they had not previously known or encountered.²²⁶ Practical Spiritual Theology done for a wider public may enrich conversations where ordinary spiritual theology is not welcome.

²²⁶ The importance of the exemplar can be traced back to James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 43.

Groome's focus on narrative and story could strengthen a public theology of the spiritual life.²²⁷

Academy. The methodology and a method of Practical Spiritual Theology could develop through accessible resources and training, which enable laity, clergy, and seekers, to retrieve some of the wisdom of past mystics for their own spiritual lives today. This work will benefit from the rigor and vast intellectual resources of the academy. The use of empirical research methods, like semi-structured interview groups, is part of the methodological toolbox of Practical Spiritual Theology. This kind of research will benefit tremendously by active academic engagement. Not all Practical Spiritual Theology will require university sponsored or affiliated research, but the project itself will be greatly enriched by such research. Scholars from many social locations and faith postures are actively engaged in research and writing that will be of critical and affirmative value to the development of contemporary spiritual theologies. This will include the work of sociologists of religion like Nancy Ammerman, spirituality scholars like Bernard McGinn, and others. Pitfalls to this approach to spiritual theology that can be avoided by benefiting from the wisdom of scholars in many fields, including, but not limited, to their experience in conducting qualitative research with diverse groups in diverse situations. This is a theologically overt project and so practical spiritual theology research and work might best take place at an academic institution with a faith affiliation. The normative

²²⁷ It is likely that individuals both individuals within and outside the church will engage with mystics and spiritual topics first on the basis of actual experience and reflection, even on the level of limit-experience and limit language or on the level of Paul Tillich's conception of the ultimate concern, see Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*. Additionally, Tillich's claim on page 27 of the aforementioned title is useful for considerations of public theology and practical spiritual theology more generally: "For only in the community of spiritual beings is language alive. Without language there is no act of faith, no religious experience!" A narrative approach to methodology might, therefore, be most helpful in developing a public theology of the spiritual life.

and directive elements of traditional spiritual theology are an essential part of Practical Spiritual Theology and might be difficult to maintain with institutions or individuals without explicit, Christian theological commitments.

Also, the development of practical spiritual theologies from the perspective of various contextual and liberative theologies will be best done through the academy. This could lead to the development of specialized practical spiritual theologies, such a feminist understanding of Walter Hilton. Practical Spiritual Theology could be a way for contextual theologies to develop their own spiritualities that reflect their concerns while still being resourced and connected to the wider Christian Tradition.²²⁸ Research could also be done with groups that are diverse, with representatives from many social location, resulting in the development of theologies and practices, that while not universal in their applicability, are none the less useful to the spiritual lives of Christians across a variety of sociological demographics. In this way, theology could serve to unite and not divide. While not always possible this unitive dimension of practical spiritual theology reflects its concern commitment to the life of the Church.

Limitations and Obstacles. The project of Practical Spiritual Theology is full of opportunities and possibilities for future development. It also faces some limitations and obstacles. A significant limitation is that the academic literature is full of new approaches and variations on past methods that no one, save the author have any familiarity with.

This also contributes to the challenge of making practical spiritual theology accessible to

²²⁸ A project that explores similar themes is Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998). Sobrino writes on page 1 of this text, “Without the spiritual life, apostolic work would be threatened from within. It would be cut off from its deepest roots.” Practical Spiritual Theology could be one way to help various liberation and contextual theologies to remain rooted in the roots of the Christian Tradition avoiding the danger of theology shifting to become only excellent sociology.

the Church. A potential obstacle to the reception of this approach is the tension between doing theology systematically and practically. Spiritual theologians may argue that Practical Spiritual Theology's emphasis on experience could endanger doctrinal truths. Practical theologians may argue that Practical Spiritual Theology's emphasis on the truths of the faith or the teachings of a mystic endanger the primary emphasis on experience becoming a theologizing from above.

There is also the obstacle of hermeneutics. There are a number of interpretive moves in and around Groome's model of shared Christian praxis. How can each of these moves be accounted for without doing violence or injustice to the author, text, or readers? In the semi-structured interviews, there was the possibility for Hilton to become only an object for associative reasoning, an object for transference. The intention is to form a dialogue and dialectic between the mystic and contemporary Christians, but those of us in the present can easily shout down those from the past. How can a mystic's voice and message be given real opportunity to inform and transform the thinking of contemporary Christians, including the researcher? There is also a possible limitation of a range of subjects. Is Practical Spiritual Theology specifically concerned with medieval mystics? Could the emerging method and methodology be used with modern spiritual writers? Probably, but is this desirable and in alignment with this theology's emphasis on the retrieval of past wisdom?

Conclusion

Walter Hilton often refers to the goal of the spiritual life as being "Jerusalem." Jerusalem being a metaphor for the spiritual life and its journey with and toward the Trinity. This is what the medieval mystic oriented her life toward: union with God. A

union which could not be fully experienced on this side of eternity. For centuries, the mystics and saints, have been witnesses to the reality of God. They have also been witnesses to human lives intentionally and rigorously ordered toward God. Practical Spiritual Theology is a modest effort in comparison to the achievements of these mystics and the venerable shelves of theological libraries; none the less, it is a project that intends to draw contemporary Christians into the warmth and light of God's presence through these mystics and then, encouraged and guided by them, to pilgrim forward in their own lives of faith; until they too, arrive at that great mystery, the goal of mystics: God.

Appendix A

IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board

16400 N.W. 32nd Ave., Miami, Florida 33054

Proposal Approval Form

St. Thomas University

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S) Dr. Bryan Froehle supervising Doctoral Candidate Kevin Goodrich

TITLE:

Contemporary Christian Response to Walter Hilton: Towards an Empirically Grounded Practical Spiritual Theology

in accordance with St. Thomas University policy and national guidelines governing the ethical use of human participants in research, the university Institutional Review Board certifies that the above stated project:

_____ being exempt from full review was peer reviewed by the IRB under the expedited review process and in its original form was

X_____ was revised according to suggestions made by the IRB to the investigators and was

_____ being subject to a full review by the IRB was

REVISION REQUESTED ON _____

APPROVED ON 05/09/2019

DISAPPROVED ON _____

Investigators may request continuation of a project using the IRB project submittal form and procedure.

Human Subjects are adequately informed of any risks:

Gary Feinberg, Ph.D.

Gary Feinberg, Ph.D.

Chair, St. Thomas University IRB

Date: 05/09/2019

Appendix B

IRB Submission Form



Institutional Review Board

Research Proposal Submission Form

Instructions: The Principal Investigator must submit this form and copies of all proposed recruitment materials, survey instruments/interview protocols and consent forms to the IRB Chair for review. If the research proposal is for a Master's thesis or Doctoral dissertation, you must also submit your Chapter One to the IRB Chair for review.

Consent forms must include the following (Please check the following boxes to ensure that your consent form meets these criteria):

- description of the project**
- statement of right to withdraw**
- statement of confidentiality**
- explicit statement of consent**
- contact information**
- statement of risks/benefits**
- description of any costs, credits, or payments**

IRB Training Certificate (Secured at: <https://phrp.nihtraining.com/index.php>)
a line for signature and date

1. Title of Protocol

Contemporary Christian Response to Walter Hilton: Towards an Empirically
Grounded Practical Spiritual Theology

2. Principal Investigator Contact Information (Please refer to the IRB policy on PI
Eligibility)

A. Name: Bryan T. Froehle, Ph.D.

B. Title: Professor of Practical Theology

C. STU Email Address: bfroehle@stu.edu

D. Phone Number: 305-628-6636

E. Program: Practical Theology

F. Department: School of Theology and Ministry

G. College: School of Theology and Ministry

3. Student Investigator Contact Information (if applicable)

A. Name: (Rev.) Kevin Goodrich

B. STU Email Address: kgoodrich@stu.edu

C. Phone Number: [REDACTED]

D. Program: Ph.D., Practical Theology

4. Co-Investigator Contact Information (if applicable) N/A

5. Type of Proposal (check one)

New Proposal Continuation/Renewal Revision

6. Proposed Start Date: May 2019

7. Proposed Duration of Research: 6 months.

8. Where will the research be conducted?

Southwell, England, United Kingdom

9. Briefly describe the proposed research project.

This dissertation project examines the implications of the spiritual theology of Walter Hilton, a fourteenth century English mystic, for twenty-first century Christians in general and Anglicans in particular. In order to better understand the connections between his spirituality and Christians today, semi-structured focus groups and in-depth interviews will be conducted. Participants in the empirical portion of this practical theological research project will be Christians living in

the Southwell region of England, the area where Hilton lived. Research questions will investigate four areas. (1), Salient forms of spirituality as practiced by Southwell Christians today and Hilton in his time. (2), The three states of Christian life as understood by Hilton and Christians today. (3) Spiritual practices for union with God, in light of Hilton's spiritual theology. (4) Hilton's potential contribution to contemporary Christian spirituality and spiritual theology. This project is meant to bring the teachings of Walter Hilton and the spiritual theological tradition of which he is part into conversation with the experience of contemporary Christians. Empirical findings of the dialogue between the spiritual understanding of Hilton and Christians today are intended to carry significance beyond the teachings of Walter Hilton by suggesting means of better appropriating historical spiritualities for contemporary spiritual life and ministry.

10. Is your project funded by an external (non-STU) sponsor or agency? Please check one.

If Yes, please list funding source.

No Yes Funding Source: Private Funds

11. Will your research involve any of the following populations? Please check all that apply.

Children under age 18 Incarcerated prisoners Mentally ill/disabled

N/A

12. Will any payment or course credit be awarded to participants? Please check one.

If Yes, please specify the type of compensation. If the compensation is course credit, please indicate which alternative means of obtaining course credit will be available to students who do not wish to participate.

No Yes Type of Compensation: N/A

13. What are the source(s) of your proposed research (interviews, surveys, statistical data sets, etc.)?

A combination of semi-structured focus groups and in-depth interviews.

14. Who are the source(s) of proposed research (STU students, healthy adult volunteers, etc.)?

Lay and ordained leaders in the Southwell Christian community as well as other Christian adults involved in the Southwell Christian community.

15. What are the risks associated with participation in the proposed research project (minimal risk, use of deceptive techniques, use of private records, etc.)?

The risks in this project are minimal. However, there is always a possibility, however slight, that someone could share something not pertinent to this project that could somehow be a risk to someone's reputation. Any potential harm that such a possibility, however small, could create will be protected by ensuring confidentiality with regard to the identity of the persons participating in the

research. Any reference to participants in the dissertation and other publications will use aliases. Further, everything will be done to ensure that the interviews remain focused on Hilton and the questions described in this IRB application, always conforming to the highest ethical standards of human subject research. Data will be under lock and key if in physical form and password protected in electronic form, with an exclusive focus on the research questions.

16. What are the benefits associated with participation in the proposed research project (stress relief, contributions to the discipline, etc.)?

The participants will be contributing to a project designed to advance Christian spiritual theology in the twenty-first century by exploring possibilities for engaging the writings and teachings of mystics of past centuries. The goal is to more effectively appropriate this spiritual wisdom for contemporary spiritual life and ministry. In addition, insofar as participants be drawn from the same area as that of the fourteenth century mystic under study, the project will benefit participants and the local area by further increasing their knowledge of and appreciation for their local history and heritage.

17. How do you plan to recruit your participants (email, flyers, U.S. Mail, social media, etc.)?

The leadership of Southwell Minster (that is, the local Anglican cathedral) will be introducing the student researcher to three of their regular small groups, as well as various individual parishioners, for the purpose of recruiting participants for the study.

Principal Investigator Signature: _____

Date: _____

Student Investigator Signature: _____

Date:

DO NOT WRITE IN THIS SPACE

Date Received: _____

Protocol Qualifies for: Full Review___ Expedited Review___ Exemption___

Note: The STU IRB reserves the right to request additional information as necessary to make an appropriate determination of research eligibility.

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Contemporary Christian Response to Walter Hilton: Towards an Empirically Grounded Practical Spiritual Theology

You are being invited to participate in a research study about spirituality, faith, and the writings of the spiritual teacher, Walter Hilton. Hilton lived at the Augustinian community associated with the Priory Church in Thurgarton during the fourteenth century. The information collected will explore the ways in which spiritual teachers of the Christian past can be resources for the spiritual life of Christians today. It may also contribute to a greater recognition of Walter Hilton, his writings, and spiritual interest in the Southwell and Thurgarton region.

This research project is being conducted by Father Kevin Goodrich, O.P., a doctoral candidate in theology at St. Thomas University, Miami, Florida, for his doctoral dissertation. There are no anticipated risks if you decide to participate in this research study nor are there any costs for participating in the study.

Your participation is fully confidential, meaning that your name will not be used in the research, eventual dissertation, or any other presentation or publication resulting from this work. Instead, an alias will be used and any description given will avoid identifying information. All research records will be stored securely under password protection.

Upon the completion of this study, the data will continue to be maintained securely by the interviewer but only after the definitive of any identifying information.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your participation at any time and to refuse to participate without penalty or reprisal. If you choose to participate, please sign the form below. By signing, you are indicating that you are over 18 years of age and therefore of a legal age to participate. If you have questions about the study, please contact me directly at [REDACTED] or kgoodrich@stu.edu.

Signature of Interviewer

I understand the procedures described above. Any questions about the nature of the research or my participation have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study and have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Interview Participant

Signature of Interview Participant

Date

Appendix D
Interview Protocol

**Contemporary Christian Response to Walter Hilton: Towards an Empirically
Grounded Practical Spiritual Theology**

The protocol envisions semi-structured small groups and individual in-depth interviews with five main parts. The goal is to make sure that certain topic areas are explored, while keeping the interview conversation as open-ended and in-depth as possible without straying from the topic and focus of the research and research questions. It is therefore expected that respondents will provide data on some of these topics, particularly sub-questions or probes, without being specifically asked or probed as such. Topics envisioned to be a particular priority for the interviews are marked with an asterisk (*). Standard neutral follow-ups (such as “Tell me more”) will be used wherever deemed necessary or applicable for satisfactory conduct of the research. Questions have been drafted to move from initial rapport-building questions toward a thematic sequencing of questions. The movement as such is designed to be from the present toward the past and future, the impersonal to the personal, and the personal experience of participants to reflections on possibilities for others within the church. To facilitate use of this protocol by the interviewer, aspects not themselves questions or follow-up comments or probes are given in capital letters (instructions), italics (script), or bold (thematic subdivisions).

Introductory Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As you know, I'm interested in understanding your experience of faith and spirituality and how the teachings of Walter Hilton might be of help to your faith and spirituality, as well as that of other Christians today. This interview is part of my doctoral dissertation. In research records and reports, your name will not be used so as to keep your participation confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your participation at any time without any penalty or reprisal. To indicate that you are aware of these protections and have formally agreed to participate, I need to ask you to sign the Consent Form. One copy is for you and the other copy is for me. Thanks very much.

I. Opening

My first question is about spirituality and mysticism. We're gathered here in the land where Hilton is from, one of the great spiritual teachers of the English mystical tradition, whose insights and teachings may offer something important for our time. Let's begin with thinking about spirituality and mysticism in general. When you think of spirituality or mysticism today, what comes to mind?

*Why?

*What would you say it means to be a spiritual person or a mystic?

IF ASKED: A mystic in the Christian tradition is someone who has experienced an unusually intimate awareness of God's presence in their life. Sometimes this may be accompanied by visions, voices, or other unusual happenings, but not always.

II. Hilton and the Three States of the Christian Life

For Hilton, and the larger spiritual tradition of which he was a part, the goal of the Christian life was union with God. For centuries before Hilton, it was thought that the best way to pursue union with God was by becoming a contemplative, a monk or nun, and retreating from the world in order to devote oneself fully to prayer and contemplation. This contrasted with majority of Christians, who were “actives,” with responsibilities in the world that prevented them from seriously seeking union with God. Hilton emphasized the possibility of a “mixed life” that is neither fully contemplative or fully active, but a mixture. This mixed way opens the door for Christians living in the world to pursue union with God. What do you think about these three ways or states of life, starting with the contemplative, but also considering the active and mixed states, as he would have described them?

*How might someone pursue the contemplative life today?

*How might someone pursue the active life today?

*How might someone pursue the mixed life today?

IF NECESSARY: Hilton, following St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great before him, sees pastors and active clergy as candidates for the mixed life.

Hilton stresses not only the active clergy, but also those with secular responsibilities as candidates for the mixed life.

III. Hilton and the Means of Contemplation

Hilton, and the spiritual tradition of his time, saw the principal work of Christians in the active way as that of charity, understood as “the love of neighbor.” The principal work of contemplatives was different and more focused on specifically seeking union with God. He recommends three means or practices of contemplation: (1), The reading of Holy Scripture; (2), meditation, and, (3), diligent prayer with devotion. How do you imagine these three practices might help people to achieve union with God?

*Have you ever encountered God while reading Holy Scripture? If so, what was your experience?

*If you have not encountered God in reading Holy Scripture, what might explain why you have not?

*Have you ever encountered God through meditation? Meditation in the Christian Tradition, especially in Hilton’s time, often involved reflecting carefully, often very imaginatively, about events in Christ’s life, such as his passion. *Lectio Divina*, which literally means Divine Reading, is an example of this kind of meditation with Scripture. Have you even done this or something like it? If so, what have you experienced?

*Have you ever encountered God through diligent prayer, what Hilton describes as prayer “with devotion?” Could you give an example of something that you experienced that was particularly powerful? Can prayer happen without devotion?

IF NECESSARY: Have there been moments in your life where you encountered God? What do you think prompted or made these experiences possible? Why did they happen?

IV. Hilton and Moderation in the Spiritual Life

Walter Hilton wrote that “For with regard to your bodily nature, it is good to use discretion in eating, drinking, and sleeping, and in every kind of bodily penance: either in prolonged vocal prayer or in bodily feeling from great fervor of devotion – as in weeping or the like – and in spiritual imagining as well, when one feels no grace. In these kinds of work it is good to keep discretion, perhaps by breaking off sometimes; for moderation is best” (The Scale, Book 1:22). What does this mean to you? How does it relate to the practice of your faith and spirituality?

*How might this quotation be applied to the practice means of pursuing union with God including engagement of (1), Holy Scripture; (2), Meditation; and, (3), Diligent Prayer with Devotion?

*In what other ways might this quotation apply to your faith and spirituality, or to that of other Christians today?

IF NECESSARY: Tell me more.

IF NECESSARY: In your experience, has the Church encouraged this sort of message in its teaching and how it schedules its own community and worship life?

V. Final Words

As we conclude, I would like to ask you for a few final words of reflection.

*How might Walter Hilton and his teachings, be a resource or help to the spiritual life of Christians today?

*What might be some helpful ways to connect people with Hilton and his teachings?

IF APPROPRIATE: What of Walter Hilton and his spirituality would you most like to know more about? How might Hilton and other spiritual teachers of past centuries benefit Christians today? What should we do to help Christians today benefit from the great spiritual teachers of the past?

Thank you very much for giving your time and sharing your insight. This will be a great help in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact information is on the copy of the Consent Form and I would be pleased to follow-up at any time. Thanks again.

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