

Book Review

The Mysticism of Ordinary Life: Theology, Philosophy, and Feminism

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Andrew Prevot, professor in Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University, focuses his research on modern developments of Christian theology, with particular emphasis on Roman Catholic thought and the spiritual traditions of Black and African American communities. In *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life*, he reimagines Christian mystical theology by synthesising the insights of seminal theological giants into a systematic, gender-informed framework. While his work is deeply rooted in the rich Christian intellectual tradition, it is Prevot's methodical presentation that renders mysticism accessible as a vibrant, everyday phenomenon. By challenging entrenched norms and reconfiguring inherited ideas, he illuminates the profound spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions of human existence. His innovative approach not only revitalises our understanding of mysticism but also opens the door to applying gender-aware methodologies to other traditionally restrictive areas of theological inquiry.

At its core, Prevot argues that mystical experience is not a series of isolated, transcendent events reserved for ancient mystics, but a normativity-critical phenomenon emerging from the fabric of everyday life. He contends that such experiences are deeply personal and inherently political, shaped by and shaping the social and cultural contexts in which they occur. Employing a feminist lens, Prevot reveals how traditional theological narratives have often excluded or marginalised alternative perspectives – particularly those concerning gender and embodiment. In reconfiguring these narratives, he enriches our understanding of mysticism by foregrounding its Christological, pneumatological, and apophatic dimensions, all of which are intricately woven into the lived realities of ordinary believers.

Prevot's argument is constructed over three distinct sections, with the first laying a historical foundation by engaging with the mystical theologies of influential Catholic thinkers, such as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Rather than simply reiterating familiar assertions about the inevitability of mysticism in Christian life, Prevot examines the profound implications of encountering the divine through grace, contending that, as these thinkers envisioned, mysticism is not about isolated paranormal phenomena but rather a genuine, transformative experience emerging from the depths of human existence. This discussion invites a reconsideration of the nature of religious experience and prompts a re-evaluation of long-held theological assumptions. Moreover, it is important

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to clarify that if the work were intended as a comprehensive manual of mystical theology, such a shortcoming would warrant criticism; however, Prevot does not aim to provide a step-by-step guide to mystical practice but instead seeks to enrich understanding by synthesising classical perspectives with a contemporary, gender-informed lens. Consequently, the limited emphasis on practical methodologies is deliberate, underscoring the book's objective of provoking critical thought and dialogue about the evolving nature of mysticism in today's context.

In the second section, Prevot turns to a philosophical exploration of mysticism, drawing on insights from Michel Henry and Michel de Certeau. His interdisciplinary method bridges phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and French feminist theory, thereby enriching the dialogue between mysticism and postmodern philosophy. He contends that mystical experience is not an abstract concept but a dynamic, lived reality that challenges conventional understandings of selfhood and the sacred. Prevot argues that a feminist interpretation of Christian mysticism benefits from the studies of immanence and otherness offered by these thinkers, grounding mystical theology in the everyday lives and relationships of diverse, often marginalised groups. By allowing these insights to resurface in the daily practices of those traditionally excluded – such as women and individuals deemed non-normative – he promotes a mysticism of ordinary life that discovers the divine in everyday encounters rather than lamenting its absence. Although his robust feminist critique effectively challenges established narratives, some intricate theological dimensions – especially concerning the transcendent nature of grace – remain only briefly touched upon. Importantly, Prevot addresses these gaps later in the book by offering a concise synthesis that not only interrogates intersecting norms of gender and race but also invigorates practices of resistance, prayer, and community. In doing so, he presents mysticism as both a political and existential phenomenon – a dynamic manifestation of divine grace that reanimates life, empowers marginalised voices, and promises an as-yet unrealised liberation.

The final section is where Prevot's unique contribution becomes most compelling. Here, he turns his attention to feminist contributions to mystical theology, drawing on the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Alice Walker. By introducing an intersectional perspective, he not only interrogates themes in Latinx popular religion but also fosters dialogue between womanism and Black studies while critically examining racial and gender normativity. His profeminist stance – committed to affirming diverse female experiences and addressing the multifaceted struggles for change in both church and society – is particularly noteworthy. Rather than claiming an exclusive feminist subject position, Prevot embraces the complexity of feminist thought while affirming women's lives. This measured approach, informed by bell hooks' vision of feminism as a heterogeneous movement dedicated to ending sexism, exploitation, and oppression, underpins his balanced critique. In her foreword, Maria Clara Bingemer – a distinguished scholar renowned for her contributions to contemporary theology and feminist studies – summarises this dual commitment by describing the book as an invaluable resource that reconciles fidelity to Christian tradition with the exigencies of modern challenges, thereby charting innovative pathways for future research.

The academic landscape in which *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life* is positioned is both timely and significant. Feminist theology has gained substantial traction in recent decades, yet the specific intersection of mysticism and feminist thought remains relatively underexplored. Prevot's work fills this gap by demonstrating that mystical experience, far from being confined to a select group of theologians, can serve as a powerful lens through which to examine issues of identity, power, and social justice. This contribution is relevant not only to scholars of theology but also to a broader academic audience across the social sciences and humanities. By rendering complex theological and philosophical concepts accessible without oversimplification, Prevot ensures that his work resonates with readers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

The intended audience for this book includes theologians, philosophers, feminist scholars, students, and researchers interested in topics related to spirituality, gender, and cultural studies. Although the text engages with dense theological ideas – such as those articulated by Rahner – Prevot demonstrates a rare talent for absorbing these complexities without diluting their essence. His clear, lucid prose demystifies intricate concepts for non-specialists, broadening discussions traditionally confined to niche academic circles and inviting a wider audience to engage with critical questions about the nature of religious experience. Moreover, by avoiding excessive jargon and providing concise explanations of complex terms, Prevot ensures that readers from diverse academic backgrounds can fully participate in the dialogue.

In terms of previous scholarship, Prevot builds on a robust intellectual heritage. Although, as noted at the beginning, he acknowledges his debt to the luminaries of theological thought, his work stands out for its innovative adoption of a gender perspective. However, despite an impressive engagement with twentieth-century theologians and philosophers, some readers may note the absence of certain fundamental voices – such as those of Yves Congar and Simone Weil. For instance, Congar's reflections in *True and False Reform in the Church* and his reimagining of Mary Magdalene as a symbol of the Church, alongside Weil's poignant critique of modernity's impact on the soul in *Gravity and Grace*, could have added further layers of depth to Prevot's argument. Moreover, while there are some references to liberation theology – especially its new feminist iteration as seen in works like *La Lucha* – key

figures in Latin American liberation theology, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez (alluded to indirectly in the Introduction) and Leonardo Boff, are noticeably absent. Their omission, while not detracting from the overall quality of the work, suggests an area for further development that might foster a fruitful synergy between liberation and feminist theological approaches in the struggle against oppression.

Constructively, while Prevot's incisive critique of traditional mystical theology is commendable, the book might benefit from a more exhaustive exploration of how feminist perspectives both challenge and have already transformed existing theological paradigms. In this regard, concrete examples drawn from the lived experiences of ordinary believers would illustrate the practical implications of mysticism and reveal its transformative potential in everyday life. Such an analysis would not only reinforce the book's relevance by providing tangible evidence of these paradigm shifts, but also offer a more comprehensive treatment of these specific themes. To fully appreciate Prevot's perspective on these issues, readers are encouraged to complement the volume with his earlier works, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crises of Modernity* (Notre Dame, 2015) and *Theology and Race: Black and Womanist Traditions in the United States* (Brill, 2018), which provide essential context and a broader exploration of these topics.

A notable strength of *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life* lies in its interdisciplinary methodology. Prevot skilfully navigates a broad intellectual terrain, drawing on diverse sources from theological, philosophical, and feminist traditions. This rich intertextuality not only demonstrates his command of the subject but also establishes the work as a significant contribution to feminist theological studies. By integrating perspectives from thinkers such as Irigaray, Kristeva, Anzaldúa, and Walker, he enriches the dialogue on mysticism and positions his work as an essential reference for future inquiry. Moreover, as he concludes chapter 5, Prevot contends that the dialogue between theology and philosophy on the mysticism of ordinary life requires engagement with a much wider array of textual and experiential sources than is typically considered. He asserts that Christian mystical theology – and its allied non-theological interpretations – deserves the same rigorous scrutiny as classical sources. In this context, feminist studies of mysticism must investigate how women navigate and transform entrenched patriarchal, colonial, and White supremacist structures by identifying where the grace of divine union emerges in everyday practices and relationships, and by discerning the concrete transformations it demands. This broader perspective reinforces the strength of Prevot's interdisciplinary approach and underscores its potential to reshape contemporary understandings of mysticism.

Rooted in a rich Catholic heritage, Prevot intentionally refrains from engaging directly with Catholic magisterial teachings – a decision he explains in a footnote in the Introduction, noting that such commentary would necessitate extensive excursions into ecclesiological debates. This deliberate omission invites theologians and scholars to address these gaps – perhaps by considering, for example, the implications of Pope Francis' call for greater female protagonism – thus enriching discussions of ecclesiastical authority and hermeneutical practices. Prevot challenges conventional understandings by proposing a vision of mysticism that is at once personal, political, and profoundly accessible, thereby sparking significant debate among theologians, philosophers, and feminist scholars. His work invites further exploration of key themes, including feminist critiques of traditional mystical theology, the intersection of mysticism and feminist thought, and the practical relevance of mystical experience in contemporary Christian practice. As Maria Clara Bingemer notes in her foreword, the book not only reaffirms the vitality of the Christian mystical tradition but also lays the groundwork for future research that dares to explore new dimensions of spiritual experience. Ultimately, Prevot's work resonates with both Christians and a broader, more secular audience, offering a timely beacon amid the crises of modernity and the ambiguities of postmodern times, and inviting all readers to reconsider the boundaries of mysticism while returning the sacred to a more inclusive, non-male-monopolised everyday life.

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