

Book Reviews

Arthur Versluis. *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017. vii + 163 pp. ISBN: 9781438466330.

Platonic Mysticism is a polemical work arguing for a particular understanding of mysticism in the West and for its broad adoption across the field of the study of religion, with special reference to the study of Western esotericism. The book makes several interesting claims, raises some important points with regard to methodology, and, speaking generally, aims to move debate on the interpretation of mysticism, and esoteric religion more generally, in fruitful new directions. Versluis' ideas are particularly persuasive in roughly the second half of the book, where he leaves behind the attempts at tradition-building of the first three chapters (see below) and enters into the question of possible relationships between metaphysics and literary interpretation, particularly the interpretation of mystical literature. Unfortunately, the book does too little to prove the rather ambitious claims made in the first three chapters, nor, even taking these claims as proven, does it really argue in a persuasive way that they are as important or as universal as the author believes. The book also suffers from some factual errors, mostly minor but occasionally quite serious. The result is an interesting and provocative book which unfortunately falls short of the standards to be expected from an historical study but which nevertheless raises many interesting suggestions, while failing to prove very much.

I take the main claims of the book to be as follows: 1) There is a central tradition within Western mysticism, the Platonic tradition, which is key to understanding Western mysticism as a whole. 2) Mysticism can be defined essentially as 'religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object.' 3) The Platonic

tradition, once well recognised as central in the academic study of mysticism at the turn of the last century, has been written out of this history more recently, a situation which should be rectified. 4) Understanding Platonic metaphysics is an essential tool for understanding the mystical literature which (Versluis thinks) stems from that tradition, and has the potential to open fruitful interpretive access to such literature and, conversely, 5) taking a reductionistic materialist or similar ‘outsider’ perspective makes it impossible fully to understand this literature.

1) Versluis begins his book with the statement that “‘mysticism’ as a descriptor becomes intellectually incoherent if we don’t recognize and acknowledge its Platonic history and context.’ (1) After this beginning, and some – but not enough – consideration of the possible parameters of the term ‘mysticism,’ (2–3) Versluis describes what he takes to be the Platonic mystical tradition, beginning with Plato, transmitted through middle and late Platonism in antiquity, with Plotinus in particular taken as the prime exemplar of the cognitive mysticism which Versluis sees as the essence of Platonic tradition, (6–7) and then the Pseudo-Dionysius, (3–4) whom Versluis refers to throughout as ‘Dionysius the Areopagite,’ whence it passes into Christianity. Later in the narrative, a longer lineage is drawn down to modern times via medieval Christian mysticism, the Florentine Renaissance Platonists, Böhme and the Cambridge Platonists, American Transcendentalism, and into modern times (e.g. 17).

One could argue that all of the writers mentioned might be seen as different parts of a long lineage of disseminated and transformed Platonic ideas – there is nothing too controversial in such a stance. The problem here is that Versluis does not really define what he means by Platonic mysticism, except as adherence to apophatic and kataphatic modes of discourse and cognition (4–8) and as ‘nondual’ cognition, discussed further below. He tells us that ‘Platonism is best understood as a conceptual map for understanding contemplative ascent and illumination,’ (5), but does not really tell us what is on the map. So, while a case can be made for constructing a long and convoluted tradition of Platonic ideas here, in the mode of the history of ideas or of discursive genealogy, Versluis does not do this.

Intriguingly, but problematically, it is unclear how historical this ‘lineage’ is meant to be; Versluis’ brings in his concept of ‘ahistorical continuity’ to describe cases like Eckhart, whom he understandably wants to include in his tradition, but for whom we have little evidence of having had access to the authors Versluis takes as canonical. (17) Such a principle makes it possible to

trace any tradition one wishes anywhere in history: if, say, I am looking for ‘nondual cognition,’ I can choose the thinkers of my choice whom I think exhibit this, and then call these thinkers ‘the Platonic mystical tradition.’ But in doing so, what have I made clear about the Platonic tradition alleged to be the key to understanding mysticism? There is not much of use here for more prosaic historians interested in the ways in which ideas are mundanely transmitted - for example, through books and conversations.

Fundamentally, those seeking in this book a historical study of Platonic thought and its transmission will be disappointed. Such historical exposition as the book does contain, particularly in the first chapter, is marred by errors of detail and broader concerns surrounding methodology. Wholly- or partly -incorrect etymologies for words derived from Greek and Latin abound. (3, 4, 5, 14, 28, 118) There is a certain methodological sloppiness regarding ancient materials, and sometimes a lack of fundamental knowledge about the authors in question: the author known as the Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, whom Versluis rightly considers an important transmitter of Platonist ideas and metaphysics to later Christian traditions, is in one place possibly a famous pagan Platonist intellectual writing as a Christian because he recognises that the time of pagan ascendancy is past (3–4), and elsewhere ‘incontrovertibly Christian.’ (14) Versluis cites as evidence for Plotinian mysticism a letter from Plotinus to a certain Flaccus (56); this ‘Plotinian epistle’ is in fact a nineteenth-century *jeu d’esprit* by an English author, which was never intended to be read as historically authentic. Elementary knowledge of the source material is lacking here. Even if we are to take the Platonic tradition being outlined in Chapter One as notional, or perhaps archetypal in the sense of Henry Corbin’s imaginal reality, or simply as a series of interesting convergences of thought with no concrete connections being posited at all (although if this is the case it is difficult to see how it can be called a ‘tradition’), we cannot interpret Plotinus based on nineteenth-century *pastiche*.

2) In defining ‘mysticism’ as ‘religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object,’ (3) a formulation which he elsewhere refers to by the terms ‘nonduality’ and ‘nondualistic’ (e.g. 97), Versluis takes several stands on the issue of what mysticism might refer to: against many currently fashionable approaches, he asserts that there may indeed be primary truths about reality which can be directly apprehended, transcending linguistic and cultural conditioning, and that such experiences are what mysticism is all about (specifics are cited below

under heading 3). The bald assertion of this case throughout the book does not however make enough of an attempt to justify the claim; whilst solid arguments are brought to bear against the often dogmatic assertions of some scholars that there are no cognitions unconditioned by language, and Versluis rightly notes that such positions risk falling into self-contradiction (again, see below), little positive argumentation is given to persuade the reader that this model of mysticism in fact reflects reality, or is the best possible model. One is left with the feeling that Versluis is preaching to the converted, and relatively uninterested in converting the materialists or other skeptics, or even other scholars of mysticism who might share his criticisms of constructivist approaches, to his way of thinking. I think this is a pity.

A further objection to this formulation is Versluis' particular characterisation of it as Platonic. As it happens, I find many of his readings of Platonist authors convincing: Plotinus, in particular, can be read as fitting well into Versluis' scheme, and the Plotinian union with the One is 'nondual' if ever anything was nondual. Versluis' approach to Plotinus' text as performative is particularly insightful: 'But the discursive exposition of a Plotinus...is not an end in itself; it is rather at the service of the contemplative ascent and transcendence.' This strikes me as a sound interpretive posture, based as it can be on Plotinus' own programmatic statements and the general tenor of his work. However, one sees from time to time a strong tendency to make the Platonism fit the definition rather than to craft the definition to explain Platonism, as when Versluis equates Buddhist ideas with Platonic ideas, (109–12) arguing that the two traditions' 'core descriptions are so akin.' (112) Are they? One danger of the leveling, 'experiential' approach to mysticism, as has often been noted, is that of equating traditions by erasing or ignoring inconvenient contradictions.

Page 107 provides an egregious case in point: Versluis thinks that mysticism is by definition a 'nondual' state of cognition, and so takes issue with Robert K.C. Forman, who refers to a 'dualistic mystical state,' and Jeffrey Kripal, who refers to a 'doubled mode of consciousness.' Versluis objects that, 'Both of these scholars are strongly influenced by Hinduism and in particular the idea of the transcendent Self or Atman that is ultimately identical to Brahman. But Platonic tradition is closer to Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism and does not privilege a separate "witness" consciousness.' Versluis does not tell us why this similarity between Buddhism and Platonism is so obvious and, on the face of it, this is a bizarre statement: if any metaphysical idea can be seen as a constant of Platonism down the ages, it is surely that there is a soul which is a locus of the human self that is eternal, is possessed of being and essence, and

is a substance in the classical sense — everything, in fact, which the Buddhist doctrine of *anatma* tells us that the human self is *not*. The Platonic soul is in fact loosely cognate with some ideas of Brahman expounded in vedanta; Versluis could not have chosen a worse example for his argument.

If Versluis thinks that this obvious metaphysical contradiction between Buddhism and Platonic thought is in fact no obstacle to equating the two traditions, he must at least explain why he thinks so; a bald assertion such as this is not good enough. There is a trick played here, as well: the Hindu influence which Versluis claims is influencing the two scholars with whom he disagrees is expressed as an ontological belief — Hinduism believes in the *existence* of a Self. The Platonic tradition, according to Versluis, does not privilege a “witness” *consciousness*’ — that is, we have shifted from ontology to epistemology, where Versluis is perhaps on firmer ground. But unfortunately, the fact that Platonism in all its forms has perhaps the most robust *ontological* claims for the ‘self’ of any world tradition will not simply vanish, and Versluis should not sidestep it in his attempts to make Platonism fit his definition of mysticism and line up with Buddhism. If Buddhists and Platonists fundamentally disagree on points of metaphysics (and they undoubtedly do), this fact must be addressed and dealt with.

3) In Chapters Two and Three, Versluis surveys modern (from the nineteenth century onward) theories about mysticism. He roughly sketches out various theories and typologies for mysticism which arose around the turn of the twentieth century, noting that an emphasis on the Platonic tradition, and particularly on Plotinus, was common in many interpretive frameworks in this period. He then charts what he sees as the downfall of this approach from the mid-twentieth century until the present, partly arising from the ‘psychologization’ of mysticism, and partly from the rise of materialist and deconstructionist attitudes. The result has been, according to Versluis, a move away from a valid model of mysticism toward a useless and doomed externalist approach, two effects of which he sums up at the end of Chapter Two (51) as follows: Firstly, the central importance of Platonism ‘becomes largely overlooked in favor of pan-traditional approaches centered on individual psychological experiences.’ Secondly, ‘the importance of Platonic metaphysics is eclipsed.’

These statements represent a low point for Versluis’ book. As we have seen, Versluis himself dabbles in at least trans-traditionalism if not outright pan-traditionalism, equating Buddhist and Platonic approaches. His understanding of mysticism as essentially a cognitive state is surely the most

‘psychologized’ possible definition. And, unfortunately, while showing a sensitive appreciation for the forms of apophatic writing found in the Platonist tradition (see below), he either does not himself understand Platonist metaphysics very well, or needs to argue much more strongly to convince us that they are indeed the rather Buddhistic, consciousness-based metaphysics he seems to think they are, and that their ontological content, which he largely ignores, is not really important.

Versluis depicts the eclipse of Platonic mysticism in modern scholarship in a polemical, almost conspiratorial way, describing it as a ‘malign’ and deliberate act of exclusion by scholars ‘seeking to excommunicate those who study and take seriously the category “mysticism”.’ (72) Many of these scholars are of course seeking to take seriously the category of mysticism – they simply disagree with Versluis as to what mysticism might mean. While they may be wrong, they are perhaps not all ‘malign.’ Versluis’ criticisms of other scholars occasionally even borders on the personal; interested parties can consult the book. Versluis finds (anecdotally) that hardly anyone studies Plotinus nowadays (71); as a Plotinian specialist, my (anecdotal) suspicion is that more people are studying Plotinus nowadays than at any time since antiquity. Versluis finds that the field of Western esotericism studies almost completely excludes mysticism (75); taking the Brill *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* as a case study, we find both an article devoted to the subject of mysticism and hundreds of references to the subject in other articles. This is admittedly not a survey of the field as a whole, but makes one feel, again anecdotally, that we cannot be looking at ‘almost complete’ exclusion.

I am, however, doing Versluis a disservice by ignoring the word ‘individual’ in his criticism of ‘pan-traditional approaches centered on individual psychological experiences,’ and here he has a very good point. In Chapter Four he does excellent justice to one question of Platonist metaphysics, the question of whether or not the interior world explored by the mystic is utterly subjective (most modern interpreters) or instead a shared realm of some kind, which all humans can potentially visit, and which can, *a priori*, be said to contain truth (Plato and all Platonists). Here Versluis musters some impressive arguments against the commonplace academic assumption that the inner life of human beings must have no common ground in truth, arguing, in effect, that some form of Platonist realism should at least be considered as a possibility. Many arguments he brings forward are convincing or at least thought provoking (although the tone is often polemical to a degree which can be distracting) and he is particularly effective, I feel, in pointing out the *ex cathedra* nature of many

pronouncements of materialist and constructivist scholars (e.g. 62–63, and throughout Chapter Four). Versluis does a salutary job of arguing briefly but effectively in Chapter Four and elsewhere that the question of consciousness is indeed far from closed, and that materialists, constructivists, and others who assume that it is often make sweeping statements from flimsy or self-contradictory premises.

4–5) We can consider what I take to be the two final main points of Versluis' book in tandem. These are that understanding Platonic metaphysics is an essential tool for understanding the mystical literature in that tradition, and that taking a reductionistic materialist or similar perspective makes it impossible fully to understand this literature. These ideas are adumbrated throughout the book, but expounded especially in Chapter Four, which, as we have seen, contains many arguments against what Versluis calls the 'externalist fallacy,' and in Chapters Five and Six, entitled 'On Literature and Mysticism' and 'Transcendence,' respectively. Here Versluis is on his home ground, and his interpretive stance comes into its own in this latter part of the book.

The basic idea that understanding Platonic metaphysics is essential to understanding mystical literature of a Platonic stamp should strike no one as either new or surprising. But Versluis is taking several further positions here. He is arguing for a form of Platonist realism, as already mentioned. He is arguing for an insider, 'emic' approach to mystical literature. He is also assuming, rather than arguing, that his understanding of Platonic metaphysics is the correct one. This final assumption is the main flaw of these latter chapters, as well as of the book as a whole, because Versluis does not simply mean, by 'Platonic metaphysics,' the realism alluded to earlier; he also means 'direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object,' i.e., his definition of mysticism, with little or no reference to that troublesome Platonist ontology, or indeed much else from the vast and rich realm of Platonist ideas about metaphysics. Again, I feel that such a position *could be* an insightful and interesting approach to Platonic ideas, and particularly to Plotinus, but it requires argumentation which this book does not attempt.

Where the book does approach questions of metaphysics beyond the bare question of philosophic realism, it stumbles and sometimes falls down entirely, especially when ironing out the real differences in the theories of different historical Platonists. Versluis argues that in Platonic mysticism the subjective consciousness of the individual self and the One are both ultimately the same; that is, they are both *nous*. (90) Such a statement might conceivably apply to Alcinoüs or other middle Platonists, but it is utterly wrong in the

Plotinian context; Plotinus' *nous* mediates between the One and the soul, but the One can on no interpretation be reduced to the *nous*. This is a fairly specific point, but if we are confidently to discuss the metaphysics of a given tradition, it is essential that we get the basics right. On page 89 Versluis has the Pseudo-Dionysius speaking of the 'transcendent One'; Dionysius in fact speaks of 'God.' If we are to cast aside the theistic character of Dionysius' writing, we must at least note that we are doing so, without smuggling in terms from philosophic Platonism which are not found in our author's text. Pages 22–23 discuss the Cambridge Platonists, including them in the Platonic tradition being constructed with no reference to the importance to their thought of Origen, who is conspicuously absent from Versluis' Platonic tradition; this is to misconstrue what the Cambridge thinkers were doing. Anyone who is claiming that Platonic metaphysics are an essential key for understanding mystical literature had better understand Platonic metaphysics and treat them with care. The point of listing these specific examples is to show that while Versluis asserts that he does so, he nowhere demonstrates this.

Turning to the arguments for an insider approach to mystical literature, Versluis makes his points much better, and in a timely fashion. He is taking a side against what he calls the 'externalist' approach, arguing in effect for a participatory reading of mystical literature by students of these matters. He argues that the academic study of esotericism could benefit from absorbing the insights and methodologies of participant observation or the 'insider approach,' which are highly developed, well-worn ground in the field of anthropology. (77–80) This is an excellent suggestion, and, happily, this approach *is* in fact rapidly growing in the field of Western esotericism studies (although perhaps not specifically in the study of mysticism). However, Versluis is not only arguing that these academic approaches from anthropology would benefit the study of Western esotericism; he is also arguing that the 'externalist' approach to mystical materials, the bracketing of all inner experiences and insights as essentially beyond the reach of humanistic scholarship, means that such scholarship will never fully understand mysticism (e.g. 77–84). He points out the role that influences such as the pressures of 'academic respectability' can play in narrowing the scope of what is seen as legitimate material for interpreting mysticism. (81–82) Although he speaks circumspectly on this point, one is left in little doubt that Versluis is making the age-old claim that 'only a mystic can understand mysticism' – the programmatic statements on page 82 make this especially clear – which is fine, but of course could be seen to make the publication of his own book self-referentially pointless: those who know will

already know, while those who do not know will never be able to learn from an external account, including, one would assume, Versluis'. However, he finds a way out of this impasse, and in a very interesting way.

Versluis argues for a kind of hermeneutical entry into mystical literature, and particularly into apophatic literature, a 'metaphysics of literature' in fact, allowing the text to fulfill its intended purpose, i.e., to point in the direction of its unsayable 'referent.' I find the discussion of performative apophatic text here (esp. 89–92) to be particularly insightful: we are unlikely to find a better description of apophatic literature than 'a literature whose primary, one may even say sole, purpose is to make itself transparent as it explicitly points toward its own transcendence and the transcendence of all linguistic constructions' (92). Versluis' discussion shows a great sympathy with this genre of writing, and even materialists, or others who do not believe in the transcendent goal to which this type of literature points, might agree that apophatic writers are trying to achieve something like what Versluis outlines in Chapter Five. Thus, if Versluis is claiming that the only people who can appreciate Platonic mystical writing at all are mystics, the claim seems overblown. If he is perhaps arguing that an at least somewhat emic approach is needed which temporarily suspends judgment for the purposes of interpretation, he of course has a point, even if the point raises its own problems.

Versluis' discussion of mystical literature does not confine itself to the strictly apophatic; he is also interested in works of a more 'visionary' character by writers like Blake, Colquhoun, Rilke, Yeats, and others. (97–103) Here the 'Platonic' nature of the texts becomes more tenuous, as Versluis himself is aware (e.g. 101, with regard to Colquhoun), but the inclusion of these authors in the book, though tangential, is welcome. Insofar as he has successfully constructed a tradition of Platonic mysticism, these and other works discussed do not fit into it very easily, and one wishes not that Versluis would abandon his fascinating treatment of these authors, but instead refine his typology of Platonic mysticism so as better to fit the facts.

An overarching problem with this book is circularity of definitions. As discussed, Versluis defines mysticism precisely as 'religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object.' This mysticism is then given as the definition of what it is to be Platonic. And Platonic mysticism is the key to understanding all mysticism: 'For our purposes, Platonism and mysticism are different terms for the same thing' (8). Versluis berates authors writing on mysticism for neglect-

ing Platonic mysticism, as he has constructed it, but nowhere has he actually made a serious attempt to argue *why* we should take mysticism to mean what he says it means, nor why we should take this also to be the essence of *Platonic* mysticism specifically, nor, finally, why we should take the Platonic tradition (if it is a tradition) to be in essence a *philosophia perennis*. This is disappointing, in that Versluis has an intriguing working definition for ‘mysticism’ which *could* further interesting discussions about Platonist authors; Versluis’ approach seems particularly apt in the case of Plotinus. But Versluis is not using his model of mysticism as a heuristic tool; he is using it as an essential definition, which he berates other authors for not sharing.

I feel that Versluis has not earned the right to do this, because he has not argued for his definition in the first place. He simply asserts that Western mysticism = Platonic mysticism = ‘nondual cognition.’ This is a disappointment, as it limits the appeal of this book, to some degree, to those who already agree with its author, and makes little convincing effort to engage others who might have questions or reservations about his conclusions. As it happens, I feel that Versluis is on to something both in his emphasis on the importance of Platonism (writ broadly) in the history of Western mystical thought, and in his insight that in Platonism (or at least in Plotinus) the proper field of investigation is consciousness. The lack of argumentation in this book is thus especially frustrating not because the claims put forward are flimsy, but precisely because they are so intriguing, and we wish the author would do them justice by making his case properly. I would by no means demand that he do so in a more ‘externalist’ or ‘anti-essentialist’ way, but I would like to see more explanatory power in his model of mysticism, and less eclecticism in his selection of facts when building that model.

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