



Research Article

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Foundations of Practical Spiritual Theology: Walter Hilton as a Case Study in Retrieval

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Abstract: This article explores the relationships between spirituality, spiritual theology, and practical theology. It proposes a synthesis of these disciplines – practical spiritual theology – as a method and methodology for retrieving the wisdom of historical Christian mystics for the purposes of sustaining and inspiring the spiritual life of contemporary Christians. The 14th century English mystic, Walter Hilton, is used to illustrate this synthesis in practice.

Keywords: spirituality, mystics, Walter Hilton, ascetical theology, mystical theology, pastoral theology, spiritual life, spiritual formation, empirical theology, ministry

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 individual writers, for example, the English medieval mystic, Walter Hilton.

Hilton was a near contemporary of Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth century. He was an Augustinian Canon,² spiritual director, and writer. His most influential works are *The Scale of Perfection*,³ written to a contemplative nun, and *The Mixed Life*,⁴ written to a layman. Hilton's teaching reflects a systematic concern for the spiritual life while being 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.⁵

¹ "Christianity, including its theology, is always looking back in order to move forward." Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*.

² Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsel of Walter Hilton*, 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 Laferriere, *The Austin Friars in Pre-Reformation England*;

³ Clark and Dorward, eds., *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*.

⁴ Jeffery, ed. *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsel of Walter Hilton*.

⁵ Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 176–7.

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Bernard McGinn writes, “Walter Hilton is usually judged to provide a balanced and accessible introduction to the mystical life.”⁶ Martin Thornton tells 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹ For these reasons and more, Hilton is an excellent subject for the work of retrieval.

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.”¹⁰ This echoes the Second Vatican Council’s call to “return to the sources.”¹¹ It also includes what John Webster describes as “an attitude of mind,”¹² through which the “resources from the past are found distinctly advantageous for the present situation.”¹³ When contemplating the Christian mystics, such as Walter Hilton, their writings comprise the primary entry point into their life and teachings. This concern with the written text is essential to the 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,¹⁴ the content of the Gospel,¹⁵ and the revelation of God.¹⁶ These texts shape and support, to 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 the experience of God. 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.”¹⁷ 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 literature and offer an abundance of meaning for living the faith from the past to the present.¹⁸ This article proposes a way these classic texts, such as the writings of Walter Hilton, can be retrieved as a resource for the spiritual lives of Christians today.¹⁹

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 shorthand reference for numinous

⁶ McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 340.

⁷ Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 176.

⁸ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, xxiv.

⁹ Walsh, ed., *Pre-Reformation English Spirituality*, 196.

¹⁰ Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*.

¹¹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*. In keeping with citation convention regarding church documents, this will be cited hereafter as *LG*.

¹² Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” 584.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ 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.” Rahner, *Karl Rahner*, 148.

¹⁵ For a discussion on the content of the Gospel, the meaning of its symbols and texts, see Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*.

¹⁶ 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 Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 25–31.

¹⁷ Hebrews 12:1–2 (New Revised Standard Version). All scripture from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 154.

¹⁹ Classic texts have the potential to unjustly privilege certain voices while silencing others.

experiences or those embodied values that guide one's life.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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*.²² For others, Christian spirituality has a wider range of meanings, encompassing both the mystical experience and the entire experience of the Christian life.²³ This broader understanding offers more possibilities for nuance and greater theological clarity. Though mystical writers, such as Walter Hilton, are often concerned with fostering divine encounter and experience, their recommendations are often directed more broadly to the lives of their readers. For example, Hilton advises a layman (sic) to attend to his business and to his prayers.²⁴

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.²⁵ This field is interdisciplinary, with scholars from many disciplines examining the lived experience of those seeking life in Christ. These multiperspectival approaches are extremely helpful, enriching both academic and pastoral reflections on the subject. While there are many ways of conceiving this discipline, many 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."²⁶ The approach suggested by this article 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 and other theologically grounded mystics, including efforts to interpret their 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."²⁷

1 Spiritual theology

In contrast to some approaches 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.²⁸

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 their spiritual lives, help

²⁰ Nassif et al., *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*, 12.

²¹ 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 Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*.

²² McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, 5–6.

²³ Dreyer and Barrows, eds., preface to *Minding the Spirit*, xiii.

²⁴ Jeffery, ed., *Toward a Perfect Love*, 16.

²⁵ Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality," 7.

²⁶ Dreyer and Barrows, *The Study of Christian Spirituality*, 6.

²⁷ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 119.

²⁸ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 22.

them move toward the more advanced steps, and ultimately experience union with God.²⁹ Perfection in the spiritual life, as conceived by Hilton and other mystics, 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.”³⁰ Chan describes systematic theology as an exploration of the rational concepts of Christian experience while spiritual theology explores the experience behind those formulations.³¹ 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.³² Aumann sees ascetical and mystical theology as the application of “moral theology to the direction of souls toward ever closer union with God.”³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.³⁵ Theology in the early centuries of the Church often referred to “the true, mystical knowledge of the one God.”³⁶ Theology was the 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.”³⁷ 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 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. The approach of this article toward the retrieval of the wisdom of past Christian mystics could be incorporated into clergy formation, particularly in their field education and practicum experiences.

²⁹ 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 Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church*. 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 Edwards, *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion*. 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 nondirective counseling and care. For most of Christian history, certainly 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 some of these issues see Bakke, *Holy Invitations*.

³⁰ Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³² McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit,” 28.

³³ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 21

³⁴ Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 17.

³⁵ Farley, *Theologia*, 34–44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

2 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.³⁸ The modern origin of practical theology is often traced to Friedrich Schleiermacher, a protestant pastor and 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.”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰

Much of traditional theology begins with the revealed truths of faith before moving to human experience.⁴¹ Practical theology begins with human experience and then moves to the revealed truths of faith. In practice, all theory or theological constructs have some basis in experience (even if it has been rarified for centuries) and every action or experience is theory laden.⁴² 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.”⁴³ Pastoral theology is sometimes narrowly focused on the pastor and sometimes more broadly focused on the life of congregations. Pastoral theology 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 synonymously used.⁴⁴ What is crucial to understand about practical theology is its orientation toward experience and practice as being the first steps of theological reflection.

Practical theology is often identified for its appropriation of the social sciences in doing theology (both in methods and in 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

³⁸ This definition was used within the Ph.D. program in practical theology at St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, Florida.

³⁹ Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, xv. See also Farley, *Theologia*, 33.

⁴⁰ Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, xiii.

⁴¹ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 5.

⁴² “Nearly all practical theologians today agree that there is no straight line from theory to practice.” Cahalan and Mikoski, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴³ Bevans, “Contextual Theology as Practical Theology,” 49.

⁴⁴ Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, 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 Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*. This article engages with both understandings of pastoral theology, and the latter understanding correlating with the aims of spiritual theology.

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 proper ‘christic’ signification even where it is ideologically denied, as in certain historical movements in the practice of certain non-Christians.”⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ These methods, especially the qualitative, will be useful in exploring how contemporary Christians respond to mystics like Hilton. For example, by using qualitative research methods, such as structured interviews, to present historical mystics to contemporary persons. Practical theology also helps this process in the use of one of practical theology’s subdisciplines, *Christian education*, also known as *Christian formation*.⁴⁷ The word formation has replaced education in some circles to emphasize the holistic nature of faith formation, especially in increasing secular societies.⁴⁸ Thomas Groome’s research and writing give attention to the issues of pedagogy, learning, and formation and provide helpful insights into synthesizing spiritual theology and practical theology. Using Groome’s shared model of Christian praxis to present Hilton and other mystical writers to contemporary Christians can result in *practical spiritual theology*.

3 Practical spiritual theology

It may be helpful to understand spiritual theology using practical theological terms.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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 utilized more broadly to create brand new spiritual theologies. However, it is the contention of this article 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 synthesizes 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

⁴⁵ Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, 33.

⁴⁶ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 80.

⁴⁷ Hess, “Religious Education,” 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.

⁴⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, x.

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ Cahalan and Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical*, 4.

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 and others, namely that the pursuit of God for God's sake is the goal of the Christian faith.⁵¹ This pursuit may involve improved living, spiritual 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.

4 Specific mystics as case studies for practical spiritual theology

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.⁵² 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: focusing on specific contexts versus creating theological systems that attempt to universalize.

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 historical mystics and writers on the spiritual life. 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 careful praxis, contained in the writings of historical mystics, can be shared and recontextualized for Christians today.

5 Spiritual theology: Hilton's teaching on the mixed life

Hilton's spiritual direction assumes the traditional distinctions between the active and contemplative life.⁵³ The spiritual life for actives is focused on love of neighbor through the traditional works of corporal and spiritual mercy.⁵⁴ Contemplatives are those who are actively seeking, through a life of prayer and renunciation, mystical union with God. In traditional ascetical theology, a serious spiritual life was thought only

⁵¹ 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 and being, the pure love of God, and the condition of knowing and enjoying God forever." Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 23. Simon Chan writes, "The Christian life is an intentional process aimed at a goal that is variously called union with God (Catholic), deification (Orthodox) and glorification (Protestant)." Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 18.

⁵² See McGinn's series, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Of particular interest for this work is McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism: 1350–1550*, 331–470.

⁵³ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, xx–xxi.

⁵⁴ Clark and 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, and (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, and (7) To pray for the living and the dead.

possible by retreating from the world. 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 laypeople, as found in *The Mixed Life*, not only considers 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.⁵⁵ 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."⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷ Hilton argues that those who abandon their responsibilities or relationships in order to pursue God "do not fulfill the law of love."⁵⁸

6 Practical theology: contemporary Christian response to the mixed life

The author of this article conducted a research trip in late May of 2019 in and around Thurgarton and Southwell, Nottinghamshire, United Kingdom. The purpose of the research was to explore the possibilities of practical spiritual theology using Walter Hilton as an example. Hilton spent the most productive years of his life as a spiritual writer in the Augustinian priory in Thurgarton. The priory's structural remains and additions are now part of the local Church of England parish. The Minster Church is about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the village of Thurgarton. The Minster, which dates back to the 10th century, was made the Cathedral for the current Diocese of Southwell (and now) Nottingham in the nineteenth century. In cooperation with the leadership of Southwell Minster, two groups of eight, totaling sixteen persons, comprising women and men (both laity and clergy) from the Minster and local churches were assembled for the semi-structured interviews related to mysticism, spirituality, and Walter Hilton. The interviews were designed to draw upon the experience of the participants as well as their reflections on Hilton. The interviews provided qualitative data to enhance theological reflection. The data were analyzed using John Swinton and Harriet Mowat's qualitative method as well as Jeff Astley's method of doing ordinary theology.⁵⁹ Most participants had limited or no knowledge of Hilton, except that he was associated with

⁵⁵ Hilton's praise for the mixed life, and opening it to laypeople with worldly responsibility, 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.

⁵⁶ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 11.

⁵⁷ Plantinga, ed., *Walter Hilton: Treatise Written to a Devout Man*, 3.

⁵⁸ Jeffery, *Toward a Perfect Love*, 11.

⁵⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. See also: Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World*. In addition to these methods, this research builds upon the work of ordinary theology, listening to the voices of the faithful as serious sources of theological reflection. See Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology*.

the church in Thurgarton. Participation was voluntary and the responses of the participants were kept confidential.⁶⁰ The interviews were developed around the following research question: How can the writings of Walter Hilton help support or enrich the faith and spirituality of Christians today? Among the many topics discussed in these semi-structured interviews was the medieval concept of state of life and Hilton's innovation in suggesting laypeople could pursue the mixed life.⁶¹

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 laypeople 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. One participant, reflecting on the experience of being encouraged to seek God in the busy stages of life, shared, "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."

7 Practical spiritual theology: from states to seasons of the spiritual life

The responses and reflections of the group could suggest a new understanding of the traditional states of the spiritual life. They did not deny that some are clearly called to the active, the mixed, and the contemplative states, but they wondered whether 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 help 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 emphases of the active life.

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

⁶⁰ Participants signed a form explaining the research process and confidentially measures of the project. Data were collected by the author by note taking as well as audio recording. These recordings were later transcribed, and no data about names of participants were recorded. All data are stored digitally under password protection. The entire project was reviewed and approved as meeting the ethical protocols and standard research practices with human subjects by the Institutional Review Board of St. Thomas University, Miami, FL, USA, on May 2, 2019.

⁶¹ The semi-structured interviews were developed around the following research question: How can the writings of Walter Hilton help support or enrich the faith and spirituality of Christians today? The questions incorporated both general elements about the spiritual life and certain facets of Hilton's teaching. The script used to conduct the semi-structured interviews may be obtained by personal correspondence with the author.

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 can help to preserve and recontextualize the careful praxis of past mystics for the benefit of the spiritual lives of Christians today.

Data availability statement: The data sets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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