Louise Nelstrop is a Research Fellow and Project Manager at St. Regent’s Park, Oxford, and has several publications on medieval mysticism, ecclesiology, and theology. Kevin Magill of Bristol University and Bradley B. Onisha of Berkeley specialize in medieval mysticism and critical theory. In this book, these authors have collaborated to offer an introduction to Christian mysticism and its modern theoretical approaches.

Offering a broad analysis of mysticism, from its inception in the work of Plotinus to thinkers from the late medieval period such as Jean Gerson, the purpose of this book is to introduce key themes and concepts and then discuss how they are interpreted by scholars. The book is set up as an exploration of Christian mysticism and the authors never provide a firm definition of the subject. Rather, each chapter begins with a historical analysis of a particular topic, such as ‘Erotic Imagery,’ and then presents an overview of the contemporary theoretical approaches to that particular sub-topic. The value of this approach is that it allows the authors to introduce the diverse body of literature and history that can be classified as ‘Christian mysticism’ while also introducing the contentious theoretical disputes over what this literature implies. For instance, one of the overarching questions that concerns scholars is whether this mystical literature describes ‘actual’ experience of the divine or if it is merely performative, reflecting cultural norms and ideals.

The book is organized into three sections: ‘Key Themes and Motifs,’ which discusses everything from the Neo-Platonic background of mysticism to its hermeneutical framework; ‘Later Developments in Christian Mysticism,’ a section that includes a chapter on female mysticism, heresy, and imaginative literature; and ‘Postmodern Re-Readings of Pseudo-Denys and Augustine,’ which focuses on the work of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. However, the most noticeable element of the book is the difference between the perennialist, contextualist, and performative readings of mystical
texts, which the authors stress throughout the first two sections. Perennialist readings, like those expounded by William James and Rudolf Otto, defend the authenticity of mystical experience and merely offer an interpretative framework that enables readers to decipher the different types of literature. Contextualist readings, in contrast, argue that there is “NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences” (12). Scholars such as Steven T. Katz and Bernard McGinn assert that there is no experience that is not shaped by cultural categories. Performative language readings move even further away from the value of experience, perceiving visions and ecstatic experiences as merely a reflection of sacred texts. Scholars like Denys Turner and Michael Sells not only reject the idea that experience is the essence of medieval contemplative writing but also stress that these writings are only a reproduction of cultural motifs.

The weakness of the book is that it is too broad. It moves all the way from Plato to Derrida without adequately explaining either. It is devised as an introductory textbook yet its discussions on the historical figures and texts are too thin to allow for an adequate assessment of the material. For instance, the chapter on ‘Selfhood and Interiority’ contains only nine pages of reflection on the primary sources (Augustine and William of St Thierry) and then considers the theoretical work of Ephraem Hendrix, Cuthbert Butler, Andrew Louth, James O’Donnell, John Kenney, Denys Turner, Mark McIntosh, and Bernard McGinn. Moreover, the treatment of these theorists is broken off into little sections that are not connected or fully explained by the authors. In its current form, this book reads more like an assemblage of encyclopedic entries than a synthesized, well thought-out introduction to Christian mysticism.

Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from the broad overview this book provides. Despite its shortfalls, there are no other books available that bring together the work of these differing theorists—from Otto to Derrida—and discusses them in relation to Christian mysticism. The authors are missing an overall cohesion and reflection on their subject but their study is a welcome resource in the field. If accompanied by a collection of primary sources to be read alongside the various chapters, this book would make a useful textbook in introductory classes on Christian mysticism.