“Sweetnesse in Communion with God”: The Contemplative–Mystical Piety of Thomas Watson

Tom Schwanda

Dewey Wallace summarizes a key component of Puritan piety when he states:

Heavenly mindedness was the spiritual person’s foretaste of the joys of heaven through meditation. This not only strengthened the soul for earthly trials but was one place in Puritan spirituality where the mystical element entered. The heavenly minded person was absorbed in divine things, weaned from earth, and advanced in communion with God because proleptically transported into that blessed state where the saints see God and enjoy his presence forever… To meditate on that state, binding one’s heart so closely to God that all else paled into insignificance, was the aim of the heavenly minded. Equally prominent with heavenly mindedness as a locus for Puritan affective mysticism was the theme of union with Christ… Union with Christ thus was a reality for believers, but also an experience to be cultivated or anticipated.¹

Wallace is clearly correct to speak of the “mystical element” in Puritanism. However, for some people the combination of the terms Puritanism and mystical element are foreign and inconceivable. Fortunately more scholars are recognizing and seeking to recover this mystical element within Puritanism.² To date typically these researchers are early modern historians rather than scholars of the more specific discipline of Christian spirituality. This is evidenced by the recent publication of the Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism and the Wiley–Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism.³ While these sources contain essays written by historians they are more generally reflective of the discipline of Christian spirituality. The Cambridge Companion has two brief references to Puritanism that rely upon older and more limited resources. The Wiley–

² For an introduction and summary of this research see Tom Schwanda, Soul Recreation: the Contemplative–Mystical Piety in Puritanism, Eugene 2012, 11–22.
Blackwell Companion devotes a full chapter to exploring the mystical element in Luther and Calvin and has a reference to the most recent and complete study of Puritan mysticism.\textsuperscript{4} In comparison, Dewey Wallace, a well–respected early modern historian, has recently devoted a full chapter to Peter Sterry whom he calls a Calvinist mystic. Wallace’s research increases the visibility of this topic when he writes of the “mystical strain” of Sterry’s Puritanism.\textsuperscript{5} Even more helpful is his conclusion that “like others before, he [i.e. Sterry] drew out the mystical potential of Calvinist theology and Puritan spirituality”.\textsuperscript{6}

The language of the mystical element figures even more prominently in Bernard McGinn’s magisterial study of the history of Christian mysticism. To date McGinn has written five volumes that have only reached 1550. Rather than attempt a precise definition of mysticism that many agree is futile he speaks more broadly of the “mystical element” within Christianity.\textsuperscript{7} As he explores the rich history of Christian spirituality McGinn is attentive to the mystical theology, mystical language, mystical practices and mystical experiences. I prefer to employ the term of contemplative–mystical piety to mysticism when examining Puritanism since the language of contemplation is less problematic and confusing to many Protestant readers.\textsuperscript{8}

Life and Ministry of Thomas Watson
This article seeks to trace the contemplative–mystical piety of Thomas Watson (c. 1620–1686) who was a prominent and highly respected Puritan of seventeenth–century England. One reason for selecting him is that he is a helpful response to James Houston’s lament for the lack of contemplation within Protestantism. Houston writes: “It is one of the unfortunate reactions of the Reformation that Protestants cut themselves off from the whole medieval contemplative heritage of the church, on the grounds that the gift of contemplation was ‘popish’.”\textsuperscript{9} This essay will

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\item \textsuperscript{4} Lamm, Wiley–Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism, 539.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660–1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation, Oxford 2011, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Wallace, Shapers of English Calvinism, 85.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Schwanda, Soul Recreation, 17-18.
\end{itemize}
clearly demonstrate that Watson was intimately familiar with the writings of medieval monasticism and equally discerning to appropriate the wisdom and sources of contemplation of the western Catholic Church without becoming entangled in the theological battlegrounds of “popery” that would challenge the Reformed theological sensibilities of Puritanism.

We know very little about the early life of Thomas Watson. He matriculated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1635 and earned his BA in 1639, and MA in 1642. Upon graduation he became chaplain to the family of Lady Mary Vere, wife of the former Horace Vere to whom he penned an epistolary dedication in Three Treatises (i.e. Christian Charter, the Art of Divine Contentment, and A Discourse on Meditation) in 1660. She was a patron of numerous Puritans including Isaac Ambrose.10

In 1666 Watson moved to London and served first as lecturer for ten years and then rector for another six years at St. Stephen’s, Walbrook. He was increasingly attracted to the Presbyterian movement during the Civil War and like many other Presbyterians he supported King Charles I and strongly protested his execution. He joined the circle of Christopher Love and other London Presbyterians. He was accused of plotting to return Charles II to the throne for which he was briefly imprisoned in 1651.11 He was later reinstated to his parish at St. Stephen’s. Watson was ejected by the Act of Uniformity in 1662 though he continued preaching throughout London in scattered locations. Eventually Stephen Charnock, another graduate of Emmanuel College, joined him and they served together until Charnock’s death in 1680. Watson was a prolific writer; best known for his posthumously published A Body of Practical Divinity, being 176 sermons on the Westminster Shorter Catechism published in 1692.


11 In reality the London Presbyterians tried to gather news about Charles and about their brethren in Scotland, for which they did correspondence and exchanged the news at meetings in their homes. The accusation of a plot does not seem to be appropriate, although the gathering of news by the Presbyterians brought them in touch with Royalists who might have plotted to return Charles II to the throne, F.W. Huisman, ‘Het leven van Christopher Love (1618-1651)’, in: W.J. op ’t Hof and F.W. Huisman (eds.), Nederlandse liefde voor Christopher Love (1618-1651). Studies over het vertaalde werk van een presbyteriaanse puritein, Amstelveen 2013, 11-78, here 35-39.
These were intended for catechetical instruction as evidenced by the preliminary chapter on catechizing. Of his Discourses on Interesting and Important Subjects the ODNB assesses that they were “primarily meditational, at times even mystical, and often expressed in ecstatic language”. Of his Discourses on Interesting and Important Subjects the ODNB assesses that they were “primarily meditational, at times even mystical, and often expressed in ecstatic language”. He preached a fast sermon before the House of Commons in December 28, 1648, that Parliament refused to publish because of his sharp attack upon their hypocrisy and his support for King Charles I.

Watson was highly appreciated in the seventeenth century not only in his native England but equally well received by Dutch and German readers. Henry Newcome records that when asked to suggest books for establishing a library for a local school he expressed his desire to select the “most practical” books and named the following authors “Perkins, [...] Sibs, Hooker, Bolton, Love, Watson’s Workes”. That places Watson in an impressive list of seventeenth–century Puritan devotional writers. His Art of Divine Contentment, The Godly Mans Picture, The Doctrine of Repentance, a collection of his works as well as various sermons appeared in Puritan collected works in Dutch. Similarly a number of Watson’s works were translated and reprinted in German. In the eighteenth century Philip Doddridge reports that Watson’s Heaven Taken By Storm was instrumental in the conversion of Col. James Gardiner (1688-1745). In the nineteenth century Charles Spurgeon was attracted to Watson and penned a brief memoir of him in a reprint of Watson’s A Body of Divinity. Even though the Puritans and Presbyterians of seventeenth–century Hungary did not appear to translate Watson’s works he has been received recently by the renewed contemporary interest in Puritanism and Pietist

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16 Philip Doddridge, Some Remarkable Passages in the Life of the Honourable Col. James Gardiner, London, J. Buckland, 1785 (T155591), 44.
While there is no full-length contemporary monograph devoted to Watson it would be a mistake to assume that he has been forgotten as so many other significant seventeenth-century Puritan divines have been. Therefore numerous scholars have noticed the importance of Thomas Watson and his writings.

When the Banner of Truth Trust was established in 1957 for the purpose of reissuing Puritan classics they selected Thomas Watson’s *A Body of Divinity* as one of the first volumes to be published. However, no one has addressed the robust nature of Watson’s contemplative-mystical piety. Therefore by writing on him I hope to contribute to the expanding scholarship on Puritan piety and more specifically retrieve Watson for both the academy and church today.

**Contemplative-Mystical Theology of Thomas Watson**

Central to all writings of Christian mysticism is the essential theme of mystical union. Typically western Catholic writers employ the terminology...
of union with God while Protestants, frequent utilize the more specific designation of union with Christ. John Calvin had followed the same practice of speaking of union with Christ. One of the primary reasons is that Protestants eschewed the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the three–fold way of purgation, illumination, and union. According to this pattern union with God was the culmination of a life–long pilgrimage that was only reached in heaven as opposed to the Protestant perspective that taught union with Christ begins as a person experiences conversion and believes in Jesus Christ. Recent Roman Catholic scholarship has sought to revise this following the Protestant understanding that union with Christ must be initiated by grace and precede each phase of the *triplex-via*.

The premiere biblical book for medieval mysticism was the Song of Songs and western Catholics and Puritans alike employed it as the foundation for developing the metaphor of mystical union or spiritual marriage, as it was often called. Watson preached two sermons on the Song of Songs; one on Canticles 2:16 on the nature of the believer’s mystical union with Christ and a much larger series of sermons from Canticles 5:16 entitled *Christs Lovelinesse*. In the former sermon Watson unfolds much of the standard Puritan theology of union with Christ. He describes this mystical union as a “natural”, “sacred”, “faederal”,
“virtual”, and “mystical” relationship with Christ. Because this is a “marriage—union with Christ” Watson speaks of it as a “holy marriage”. He also illustrates the believer’s union with Christ through the imagery of a “marriage knot”. This union is with the soul of the believer and therefore Watson declares that, “in other marriages, two make one flesh, but Christ and the believer make one spirit, l Cor. 6.17”. Unfortunately Watson does not include his customary marginal references that are frequently revealing of his sources. This may indicate his desire to publish the sermon immediately without further refinement and expansion. Interestingly 1 Corinthians 6:17 was Bernard of Clairvaux’s (1090–1153) favorite text for describing union with God. Additionally Watson provides the important reminder of the depth and delight that the believer experiences with Christ when he declares, “this spiritual union, brings in more astonishing delights and ravishments, than any other marriage—relation is capable of, the joy that flows from the mystical union, is unspeakable and full of glory, l Pet. 1.8”.

Clearly this union with Christ involves each person of the Trinity. Watson reminds his listeners “God the Father gives the bride, God the Son receives the bride, God the Holy ghost tyes the knot in marriage; he knits our wills to Christ, and Christs love to us.” From the human side of this relationship faith is the essential principle and according to Watson even the smallest “Pearl of Faith” can unite a person with Christ for “a weak hand can tye the Nuptial Knot; a weak Faith can unite to Christ as well as a strong [one]”.

The larger sermon of Christ’s Loveliness contains a number of references to Bernard of Clairvaux but since the focus is that Jesus is...

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28 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 343-45.
29 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 346. Calvin parallels this language when he speaks of union with Christ as “sacred wedlock”. Calvin, Institutes 3.1.3 (vol. 1, p. 541).
31 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 346, cf. 345.
33 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 347.
34 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 344.
35 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 331, cf. 349.
altogether lovely in his crucifixion it does not relate to the Puritan retrieval of medieval mysticism. However, in the *Christians Charter*, which Ian Green terms a “Long treatise on the blessings of a believer” that went through at least six editions before 1729, Watson quotes Bernard approvingly when he speaks of our union with Christ. He defines it as “conjugal” and then referencing Bernard states that as Christ’s spouse we share in his glory. Not surprisingly Watson is consistent with other Puritans in employing the bridal language of Christian mysticism in speaking of God as the believer’s husband and the believer as God’s spouse. On one occasion Watson employs the metaphor of God as husband directly quoting Isaiah 54:5 (“Thy Maker is thy husband”). While the mystical union is begun on earth it is never fully consummated until heaven. After a reference to Tertullian Watson then declares, “The day of a Christians death, is the birth–day of his heavenly life; it is his Ascension day to glory; it is his marriage–day with Jesus Christ. After his funeral begins his marriage.” This can be somewhat misleading unless one remembers that union with Christ begins with the espousal of believers when they are justified and believe in Jesus Christ. Therefore the fullness of spiritual marriage is not experienced until one reaches heaven.

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42 See Watson, *Godly Mans Picture*, 168 where he contrasts the difference between the godly experiencing the initial benefits of spiritual marriage on earth with the necessity of waiting until heaven for its fulfillment. Cf. 347-48.
Contemplative–Mystical Practices of Thomas Watson

Watson places a high priority on the ordinances of God. That typically includes not only the sacraments, most notably the Lord’s Supper, but also prayer and meditation. One benefit of engaging in these ordinances is “This sweet enjoying of God is, when we feel his Spirit co–operating with the Ordinance, and distilling Grace upon our Hearts.” This reveals two significant principles for Watson’s spiritual theology. The Spirit is responsible for initiating and guiding our spiritual practices, but further it is the role of grace to deepen and further guide a person’s participation in these spiritual exercises. Elsewhere Watson teaches that Christ converses with the soul through his Spirit and the soul responds back to Christ by prayer and meditation. Indeed the Holy Spirit is the indwelling Spirit who resides in the believer’s heart and without depending upon the Spirit’s guidance we are nothing more than “Parrots” merely mouthing empty words rather “than weeping Doves” that we should be when we communicate with God. Therefore Watson urges his readers to “pray for the Holy Ghost, that you may pray in the Holy Ghost.” The Holy Spirit guides the believer in two other ways in practicing spiritual duties, through employing the proper motivation and deepening the intensity of prayer. Watson maintains that a “spiritual prayer” is when the Spirit activates the heart. Further a spiritual prayer is one that is “fired by love”. Elsewhere Watson warns his readers, “Duties not mingled with love, are as burdensom to God, as they are to us... Love is the most noble and excellent grace, it is a pure flame kindled from Heaven, by it we

44 Watson, Christs Lovelinesse, 464.
45 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 89.
46 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 127. Similarly Calvin is insistent that the Holy Spirit is the “inward teacher, [who] comes to them [i.e. the sacraments], by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in”. Calvin, Institutes 4.14.9, (vol. 2, p. 1284).
47 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 131.
49 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 124.
resemble God who is love.” Additionally the Spirit is active in enlarging the passion of prayer. Watson declares, “A righteous man is carried up to heaven in a Fiery Chariot of Devotion: This holy Fervency is caused by the Spirit of God, which both indites and inflames the Saints prayers. Rom. 8.26.”

Clearly there is a dynamic dialogue that believers experience when they engage in these practices. Watson develops it in this fashion: in the Word we hear God’s voice, in the sacraments we have his kisses and enjoyment of God. Watson reflects Calvin’s high view of the Lord’s Supper who believed that the Word and Sacrament should ideally be always joined together. The mutual interaction and complimentary relationship shine forth as Watson argues: “The Sacrament hath a peculiar excellency above the Word preached. In the Word there is the Breath of God in the Sacrament the Blood of God; in the Word we hear his Voyce, in the Sacrament we have his kisse. The Word proceeds out of Gods mouth, the Sacrament out of his sides.” Watson believed that in the ordinances Christ removes the veil and reveals his smiling face. He leads the believer into the banqueting house. Watson stresses elsewhere how

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50 Watson, Divine Cordial, 116. Watson similarly asserts that we must “perform spiritual duties spiritually”. Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 230. Watson also challenges his readers, “Let us get our hearts fired with love to God... Servile fear makes the soul fly from God, sacred love makes it fly to him.” Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm, 216.
54 Watson, Divine Cordial, 17, cf. Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm, 200.
the ordinances reveal Christ’s “smiling face”.55 Then he declares, “The Godly have in the use of the Ordinances, had such Divine Raptures of Joy and Soul–transfiguration, that they have been carried above the World, and despised all things here below.”56 These sentences are reminiscent of Bernard of Clairvaux and other medieval contemplative–mystical writings.

Asceticism has been a standard component of Christian spirituality since the New Testament (e.g. 1 Tim 4:8; etc.). The desert Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries took this to new heights often being called God’s spiritual athletes. A similar pattern of intensity in cultivating one’s relationship with God has prompted J. I. Packer to refer to Puritanism as “reformed monasticism”.57 Likewise Charles Hambrick–Stowe employs the language of “Puritan contemplative” to reflect the intensity and depth of intimacy experienced by Puritans. Puritans employed the same practices as one would find in western and Roman Catholicism.58 Watson in particular, emphasizes the role of prayer, meditation, and the sacraments and devoted a full work to spiritual duties.59 Watson produced another work exclusively on meditation.60 He describes meditation as the “bellows of the affection”.61 He also follows the popular medieval imagery that understood meditation as “chewing the cud”.62 Watson cites Jean Gerson (1363–1429) that “meditation is the nurse of

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55 Watson, Chirsts Lovelinesse, 464; Watson, Body of Divinity, 10 and Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 151.
56 Watson, Body of Practical Divinity (1692), 10.
59 Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm.
60 Watson, Christian on the Mount.
prayer”. But the Puritans were similar to many medieval writers in not clearly distinguishing between meditation and contemplation and seeing meditation as the preparation for contemplation.

Watson maintains that, “Meditation is like a perspective glasse by which we contemplate heavenly objects.” On either side of this quotation Watson cites Bernard, first regarding lectio and meditatio and then following it with the combination of oratio and meditatio. Significantly these three terms are the first three movements of lectio divina, the common monastic way for praying Scripture that ended with contemplatio.

Watson again blends meditation and contemplation when he warns readers, “Meditate much on Hell. Let us go into Hell by contemplation, that we may not go to hell by condemnation.” That thought strongly resembles Bernard’s “let us descend to hell now so we won’t spend eternity there later”.

One of the most frequent biblical reminders of the importance of meditation and contemplation is Isaac. Genesis 24:63 records his practice, “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide.” Immediately after this reference to Isaac, Watson quotes Bernard who asserts “nothing so rouses and encourages the person to all good works and all effort, as the contemplation of grace.” This further confirms how the terms meditation and contemplation could be employed interchangeably. Watson preached a sermon entitled ‘A Christian on

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63 Watson, Christian on the Mount, 396, “Meditatio nutrix orationis.” Since Watson rarely provides a full citation it is difficult to know if he was aware of Gerson’s classic The Mountain of Contemplation that was known in seventeenth-century England.

64 Schwanda, Soul Recreation, 123-24.

65 Watson, Christian on the Mount, 407. Elsewhere Watson declares, “The word is a Spiritual Optick Glass, through which we may see our own hearts.” Godly Mans Picture, 83.


67 For a helpful treatment of lectio divina from a monastic perspective see Guigo II, Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (trans.), Kalamazoo 1979, especially 65-86.

68 Watson, Christian on the Mount, 367.

69 Isaac Ambrose, Media, 251, cf. Schwanda, Soul Recreation, 128.

70 All Scripture is from the Authorized Version unless otherwise noted.

Earth Still in Heaven’ based on Psalm 139:18, “When I awake I am still with thee.” He asserts one of the ways to still be with God is through contemplation. Naturally Watson turns to David as an exemplar in contemplation. He states, “Davids minde was a spiritual mint, he minted most gold, most of his thoughts were heavenly. Thoughts are as travellers and passengers in the soul; Davids thoughts were still traveling towards the Jerusalem above... in Davids contemplations he was still with God.”

It is not surprising that Bernard of Clairvaux referred to David as the maximus contemplator. Watson also draws upon Calvin when he speaks of David as a model for meditation asserting that he “did shoot his heart into heaven by desire” through meditation. Additionally Watson also employs the biblical story of Zaccheus to illustrate the best environment for cultivating contemplation. Due to his small physical stature Zaccheus could not see Jesus and climbed a sycamore tree (Luke 19:4). Watson allegorizes the story and declares, “When we are in a crowd of worldly businesse, we cannot see Christ: Climb up into the tree by divine contemplation: If thou wouldst get Christ into thy heart, let heaven be in thy eye: Set your affections upon things above. Colos. 3.2.”

Bernard McGinn further refines our understanding when he asserts, “that contemplation consists not so much in the actual enjoyment of the vision of God here below as in the unceasing desire for reaching the full visio Dei in heaven”.

Once again Watson turns to Bernard for support for the benefits of withdrawal and solitude to better concentrate on God. He quotes Saint Bernard who instructed his readers to leave all worldly thoughts behind because the world restricted his meditation. Later in the same work Watson quotes from Bernard’s sermon 40 on the Song of Songs saying it was a “sweet saying” of Bernard, that “Christ is bashful [...] [and therefore]

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72 Watson, Christian on Earth, 417.
73 Watson, Christian on Earth, 418.
75 Watson, Saints Delight, 418. Unfortunately there is no substantial study on Calvin’s understanding of contemplation. For some helpful sources to guide such an exploration see Tamburello, Union with Christ; Randall C. Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought, Grand Rapids 2006 and Randall C. Zachman, Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin, Notre Dame 2007.
76 Watson, Christians Charter, 32.
77 McGinn, Growth of Mysticism, 140.
78 Watson, Christian on the Mount, 335.
Retire thy self by Meditation into the closet, or field, and there thou shalt have Christs embraces.” Watson, since he continues to expand his point by quoting from Bonaventure (1217–1274) that “the top of [Mount] Olympus was always quiet and serene”. I imagine that Watson connects this to Jesus’ personal pattern of frequently retiring to the mountains to spend time alone with God (Matt 14:23; 15:29; cf. Luke 5:16).

Watson is realistic and acknowledges that meditation and contemplation require effort. Many in his day were unwilling or felt their time too limited to engage in meditation. He challenges this reporting that Gerson took three or four hours to get his heart in the proper spiritual frame to be with God. This unrealistic time commitment might work against him today but Watson’s attempt was to encourage others not to give up. This is in light of his own counsel that a person should seek to devote at least 30 minutes a day to cultivate contemplation. Once again Watson draws upon Bernard in what he calls “an excellent saying”, quoting the Cistercian monk, “Lord, I will never come away from thee without thee.” Watson then adds, “Let this be a Christians resolution not to leave off his Meditations of God till he finde something of God in him; some moving of bowels after God, Cant. 5.4. Some flamings of love, Cant. 6.8.” There are other references that further illustrate Watson’s strong appreciation for Bernard but it clearly reveals his indebtedness to ‘Blessed Bernard’ as the Puritans sometimes referred to him. Finally for Watson contemplation must always lead to action. Interestingly he inserts a reference from John Cassian (c. 365–c.435) to reinforce this necessity of practicing one’s piety.

Contemplative–Mystical Experiences in Thomas Watson

Watson was well known for his piety and received the general respect of many throughout his life. While he did not leave a diary there is one specific account of the depth of his piety and his gift for prayer. Calamy
records that “on a lecture–day, before the Bartholomew–act took place, the learned Bp. Richardson came to hear him, who was much pleased with his sermon, but especially with his prayer after it, so that he followed him home to give him thanks, and earnestly desired a copy of it. ‘Alas! (said Mr. Watson) that is what I cannot give, for I do not use to pen my prayers; it was no studied thing, but uttered, pro re nata, as God enabled me, from the abundance of my heart and affections.’ Upon which the good Bishop went away wondering that any man could pray in that manner extempore.” In Watson’s farewell sermon to his congregation at St. Stephen’s, Walbrook he provides the additional insight that the task of a minister is both head and heart. Clearly his deep love and affection for his beloved congregation is strongly evident. While his task is to be balanced it appears that Watson does give a decided tilt towards the heart. This is revealed by his comments regarding the apostle Paul, that he sweetened all of his sermons with love even when he reproved the Corinthians of their sins. While we do not have any first–hand accounts of Watson’s experiences with God there are frequent references throughout his works of desire and the resulting delight that one might taste as he seeks God with all of his heart. Watson paints a compelling word picture when he asserts “Desires are the sails of the soul, which are spread to receive the gale of heavenly blessing.” This suggests that an external force can motivate desires and equally that desires generate movement in some direction. Obviously Watson liked this imagery because he used it again in his Saints Delight sermons on meditation. There he wrote “He that delights in God, doth not complain he hath too much of God, but rather too little: he opens and spreads the sails of his soul to take in more of those heavenly gales, he longs for that time when he shall be ever delighting himself in the sweet and blessed vision of God.” Significantly he clarifies the nature of desire, that it is directed towards God.

86 Calamy, Nonconformist Memorial, 189.
87 Watson, Pastors Love, 3.
89 Watson, Saints Delight, 328. This language is highly suggestive of the beatific vision. Space limitations prevent me from addressing this significant topic within the writings of Watson here but will be included in my chapter in the forthcoming book by Alec Ryrie and Tom Schwanda, Puritanism and Emotion in the Early Modern World, Basingstoke.
Another common mystical expression of desire drawn from the Book of Canticles is to be “sick of love” (Song 2:5; 5:8). In his farewell sermon to his London congregation Watson reminds them not only to serve God with all of their might “but [to] be sick with love to God”.\(^9\) In Watson’s work, the *Godly Mans Picture*, which is focused on creating the portrait of a mature Christian, he concludes this treatise that a “bruised soul is big with holy desires, yea, is sick of love”.\(^1\) Alternatively, Watson employs a variation of this phrase to capture the depth of desire that he wants his auditors to embrace when he proclaims that our hearts should burn in love to God.\(^2\) Naturally one’s desires are not constant and can decline. In those situations Watson declares, “So when the flame of your love is going out, make use of Ordinances, and Gospel promises, as fuel to keep the fire of your love burning.”\(^3\) In his treatise on spiritual duties Watson concludes with a similar reminder, “Let us get our hearts fired with love to God.”\(^4\) Significant within the larger study of Christian spirituality the themes of fire and love have been called the dominant images of contemplation.\(^5\)

The culmination of this desire might well lead the believer to a profound experience of delight and enjoyment of God. I say might for the Puritans like the earlier medieval believers were clearly aware that the joys of contemplative—mystical piety were always a gift from God. The person could engage in various spiritual duties, but that was never a guarantee that the desired longing would be experienced. Both western Catholic mystics and Puritans often employed the language of fruition. In Watson’s classic, *A Body of Divinity*, he maintains that there is a twofold fruition of enjoying God, one in this life and another in the life to come.\(^6\) More significantly is Watson’s deep appreciation for Bernard. When the saints hear the words “come ye blessed of my father” (Matt. 25:34) in heaven they are filled with “ineffable joy”. Watson translates the Bernard

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\(^{9}\) Watson, *Pastors Love*, 16.


\(^{2}\) Watson, *Divine Cordial*, 122.


\(^{4}\) Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 216, cf. 54.


citation as “like musick in the eare, and a Jubily in the heart”. 97 In another work Watson quotes ‘Saint Bernard’ saying: “there is that ‘sweetnesse in communion with God’.” 98 There is also a “delicious sweetnesse in God”. 99 Unquestionably this enjoyment was a result of the intimacy of being in sweet communion with the Triune God. While Watson, similar to most Puritans, rarely quotes directly from Calvin, the theme of sweetness of God is present in the Genevan reformer. 100 Once again Watson asserts that the delight of heaven can begin first on earth; “If we are in Christ while we live, we shall go to Christ, when we dye; union is the ground of privilege; we must be in Christ, before we can be with Christ.” Therefore a person’s love for God is the foundation for this enjoyment as he writes, “To serve God, to love God, to enjoy God, is the sweetest freedom in the world.” 101 Watson asks how can this be, to which he responds with a quotation from Chrysostom, his most popular Eastern Church writer, “that faith is the uniting grace” that makes this possible. 102 For Watson this spiritual joy in the Holy Spirit is essential for the earthly believer because it supports the soul in times of trouble since “Joy stupefies and swallows up Troubles” 103 and for those who “walk in close Communion with God” have feelings of joy that are “infinitely ravishing and full of glory”. 104 This enjoyment of God can actually be cultivated before heaven because “the Sabbath is a Delight, Religion is a Recreation” and therefore one can experience already on earth the “Divine Joys [that] are so

98 Watson, Saints Delight, 327, cf. Watson, Christian on Earth, 417; Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm, 211; Watson, Holy Eucharist, 25 and Watson, John Wells Funeral, 23 for ‘sweet communion’ references. Watson also counsels his readers that if they desire “constant communion with God, [they] must double their devotion”. Watson, Christian on Earth, 431.
99 Watson, Divine Cordial, 118.
101 Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm, 125.
102 Thomas Watson, The Holy Longing: or, the Saints Desire to be with Christ, London, Ralph Smith, 1659 (Wing (2nd ed.) / W1130), 39, cf. Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 353 that communion is found in union with Christ.
103 Watson, Body of Divinity, 211.
104 Watson, Body of Divinity, 214, cf. Watson, Plea for the Godly, 47, 48 and Watson, Divine Cordial, 154 on the enjoyment and joy that can experienced in God.
One of Watson’s central pastoral concerns was that his congregation might know the same delight and communion in God that he knew. In his farewell sermon in which he lists twenty directions to encourage his faithful flock his first priority is for them to maintain a continual relationship with God by “keep[ing] intercourse with heaven”. Communion with God must be cultivated so it does not become stale or lifeless. Drawing from the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:15 Watson understands there is a huge difference between “being in Christ” and “growing in him” between “our ingrafting, and our flourishing: be not content with a modicum in Religion”. This active and intentional growing in Christ is reflected in another biblical image of “walking with God” which “implies the Familiarity and intimacy the soul hath with God [...] [for] there is sweet intercourse between God and his people”. Once again this intersects with Watson’s strong emphasis upon the use of spiritual duties and its relationship to contemplation. In addressing the believer’s promise in 1 John 1:3 of being in fellowship and communion with God Watson asserts, “A gracious soul hath sweet intercourse with Heaven; he goes to God by prayer, and God comes to him by his spirit; How happy is that person who hath the Angels to guard him, and God to keep him company!” What is most illuminating about this description is the marginal reference to Estius. This is most likely Willem Hessels (1542–1613) a Dutch Roman Catholic biblical scholar who was esteemed by Catholics and Protestants alike. The quotation from Estius can be translated this fellowship “will be perfected in the highest contemplation of the blessed Trinity” to which Watson adds that this is the “sweet intercourse with Heaven”.

Because our life on earth is short it is critical that believers do not squander their time. In a funeral sermon for John Wells, a fellow minister, Watson urges his listeners to keep “up a close communion with God” through “holy meditation” because it “brings God and the Soul together”. Beyond meditation Watson also stresses the necessity of

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105 Watson, Body of Divinity, 213.
106 Watson, Pastors Love, 7.
107 Watson, Divine Contentment, 274.
108 Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 251.
109 Watson, Plea for the Godly, 41, “consummatio erit in ultima contemplatione beatissme Trinitantis.”
110 Watson, John Wells, 23–24.
employing the broader category of ordinances\textsuperscript{111} as well as singling out prayer\textsuperscript{112} keeping the Sabbath\textsuperscript{113} and the Lord’s Supper\textsuperscript{114} as means to growing in communion with God. However, Watson does not want his listeners to be confused and think that their spiritual duties are the means to achieving this sweet communion with God. Instead he communicates that we can climb to heaven only by the cross of Christ.\textsuperscript{115}

As already evident Watson, reflective of many Puritans, employed the vivid love language of the Song of Songs to capture the delight and enjoyment of God. Certainly ravishment is a potentially ambiguous term.\textsuperscript{116} While the word could be used in the forceful overpowering a person, most likely a woman in rape, it was used predominantly by the Puritans to speak of the positive sense of being carried away by the liberating and fulfilling love of God.

For example, Jesus kisses us with the kisses of his lips and in speaking of the angels in heaven Watson declares that they are ravished with delight in praising God.\textsuperscript{117} However, it is not only the angels who are ravished but that believers also experience the same overwhelming delight. The intimacy of spiritual marriage with Christ produces similar rich descriptions of enjoyment; “this spiritual union brings in more astonishing delights and ravishments, than any other marriage—relation is capable of.”\textsuperscript{118} In the \textit{Body of Divinity}, Watson instructs, “That which is the chief Good \textit{must ravish the Soul with pleasure} [...] this is to be enjoyed only in God.” He continues by drawing a comparison between the partial joy that can be experienced now in relation to the culmination of that in heaven, “If there be so much delight in God, when we see him only by Faith, 1 Pet.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{111} Watson, \textit{Divine Cordial}, 96.
\bibitem{112} Watson, \textit{Heaven Taken by Storm}, 202.
\bibitem{113} Watson, \textit{Heaven Taken by Storm}, 64, 69, cf. Watson, \textit{Body of Divinity}, 331–49 on Sabbath—keeping.
\bibitem{115} Watson, \textit{Divine Contentment}, 300. Watson enjoys applying this metaphor that Jesus or the ordinances are the ladder or Jacob’s ladder to ascend to heaven. Watson, \textit{Christs Lovelinesse}, 445; Watson, \textit{Christians Charter}, 108 and Watson, \textit{Beatitudes}, 445, 460.
\bibitem{117} Watson, \textit{Saints Delight}, 313, 327. The reference is to Song of Songs 1:2.
\bibitem{118} Watson, \textit{Godly Mans Picture}, 347.
\end{thebibliography}
1.8. what will the joy of Vision be when we shall see him face to face?” Watson understands ravishment as the result of gazing on God, “He who loves God, is ravished and transported with the Contemplations of God, *Psal. 139.17.*” And to encourage his auditors Watson questions “Can we say we are ravished with delight when we think on God? Have our thoughts got wings? Are they fled aloft? Do we contemplate Christ and Glory?” Even a casual reading of Watson’s writings shouts a resounding affirmation to his question. Due to this importance of contemplating on the beauty and splendor of God Watson does not tire of repeating this truth. Later he declares, “The soul while it is musing on Christ, is filled with holy and sweet raptures, it is caught up into Paradise, it is in Heaven before its time.” Watson includes a marginal reference that reinforces this teaching by citing Bernard’s emphasis of the “grace of contemplation”. In this same context Watson speaks of the person who “contemplates the beauty of Holiness, the love of Christ”.

In a treatise appropriately entitled, *Christian On Earth Still in Heaven*, Watson observes that the Lord “manifests himself in the comforts of his Spirit, which are so sweet and ravishing, that they *pass all understanding*; and do you wonder the soul is so strongly carried out after God?” This sentence provides a good definition for the nature of ravishment in attempting to find words to express the ineffable nature of God’s love in the believer’s experience of it. Watson draws once again upon the bridal language of the book of Canticles when he reveals his awareness of spiritual intoxication; “Christ will bring his Spouse into the *banqueting–house*, and she shall be inebriated with his love; O what joy to be drinking in this heavenly Nectar [...] Thus all the senses will be filled

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119 Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 11. Watson also rejoices in the mystical union that has begun on earth and is consummated in heaven that creates “infinitely transporting and ravishing” comforts. Watson, *Beatitudes*, 118.
121 Watson, *Plea for the Godly*, 13, “*quam gratia contemplationis*”.
with joy.” 123 While not specifically named, this language is reflective of Bernard and many other medieval Christian contemplative writers. 124

In describing the “Delectability” of being blessed in his treatise on the Beatitudes Watson writes, “A kiss from God’s mouth puts the soul into a Divine Extasie.” 125 Once again Watson turns to the Song of Songs to find words that might capture the depth of a person’s communion with God. In a funeral sermon in which Watson preached for a fellow minister he seeks to stretch the spiritual imaginations of his listeners and readers by declaring “think what it will be to be led into Christ’s wine-cellar, to have the kisses of his mouth”. 126 However, it is critical to recognize that as one grows in deeper intimacy and communion with God that one’s experience may indeed produce different expressions than joy and ravishment. Watson contends that another very appropriate demonstration of recognizing God’s presence is that of tears. 127 Tears are often associated with sadness for sin but can also be an expression of gratitude. Watson emphasizes that, “The pardoned sinner is a weeping sinner.” 128 Further, “Spiritual joy and mourning are not inconsistent [...] and the sweetest joy is from the sourest tears.” 129 He expands on these possibilities when he describes the various experiences a believer might have at the Lord’s Table. He reports instead of joy it might be in a renewed sense of strength or it may be tears. 130 Drawing upon the biblical example of Hannah, Watson recognizes “A Christian thinks himself sometimes in the suburbs of heaven when he can weep.” 131 In reality it would take a full article to explore the depth and variety of Watson’s uses of tears throughout his

123 Watson, Christians Charter, 43.
125 Watson, Beatitudes, 25.
126 Watson, Fight of Faith Crowned, 23, cf. Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 282 and Watson, Divine Cordial, 52 for other examples of the kisses of his lips as an expression of intimacy with Christ.
127 Watson, Holy Eucharist, 83.
129 Watson, Christians Charter, 137.
131 Watson, Beatitudes, 93.
corpus.Significantly McGinn notes that “the constant flow of tears, [is] an important element in all Christian piety, but especially among monastics.”

Formation and Development of Watson’s Contemplative–Mystical Piety
Recognizing the richness of Watson’s contemplative–mystical emphasis raises the important question regarding its origin. It is likely that a number of formative themes shaped his vibrant piety. First, a person’s temperament and disposition can contribute significantly to one’s piety. There are many challenges to reconstructing an accurate psychological profile of any person, especially if he is dead. The limited resources of Watson’s life further complicate this reconstruction. Nonetheless some suggestive insights can be gathered from his sermons and other sources. As already indicated Watson displays a strong appreciation for solitude and reveals a sensitive disposition to contemplation. He frequently articulates his desire for sweet communion that is built upon gazing at God that is further stimulated by a longing to enjoy God more fully. This emphasis in his writings would most likely have mirrored his own spiritual duties. In one of Watson’s farewell sermons he communicates the importance of loving others, even those whom we call our enemies. Further his writings reflect an irenic spirit and even Simon Patrick’s highly critical conformist work, Friendly Debate, accords him respect due to his balanced manner of relating to others.

Second, a person’s education is likely to contribute to shaping one’s piety. Watson matriculated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge in

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132 See for example Watson, Godly Mans Picture, 70–74; Watson, Plea for the Godly, 27; Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm, 129, 150, 301; Watson, Beatitudes, 72, 91; Watson, Divine Cordial, 97, 98; Watson, Fight of Faith Crowned, 18–19; Thomas Watson, Crown of Righteousness, London, Joseph Cranford, 1656 (Wing (2nd ed.) / W1120), 6, 23; etc.
134 Edmund Calamy, A Compleat Collection of Farewell Sermons, London [no publisher], 1663, (Wing / C 5638 aA), unpagedinated, quote at image number 100.
135 Watson, Heaven Taken by Storm, 146. For example compare Watson’s critique of Bonaventure’s teaching that the crown of righteousness is by merit not God’s mercy and his later appreciation of him in the same work. Watson, Crown of Righteousness, 3, 28, cf. above for Watson’s appreciative citations of Bonaventure’s instruction on piety.
136 Calamy, Nonconformist Memorial, 188.
1635 and received his BA in 1639 and MA in 1642. He was known as a “hard” or industrious student. Recent studies of Emmanuel College and more broadly, Cambridge University reveal, “that we know far less than many historians have claimed of what students actually studied”. Nevertheless, there are many facts that can be woven together to provide at least a broad background to Watson’s probable education. Emmanuel College, Cambridge was established in 1584 under the direction of Sir Walter Mildmay (c. 1520–1589). The original statutes written by Mildmay reveal the primary purpose was to provide for “the education of young men in all piety and good letters and especially Holy Writ and Theology, that being thus instructed that they may therefore teach true and pure religion” and further this “one aim, [was] of rendering as many persons as possible fit for sacred ministry of the Word and the sacraments”. From its earliest day, Emmanuel had a reputation of being a “Puritan college”. While there are numerous mundane organizational and administrative details to these statues, it does significantly require daily public prayer and “especially on Sundays” for “the increase of faith, and probity of morals”. Mildmay’s statues were still in effect during Watson’s time.

A central influence in any seventeenth-century student’s education would be their tutors. While there are lists of tutors during Watson’s time we do not know which of them may have guided his formation. Masters of the college also exert a significant influence on the shaping of the student’s education and piety. Watson matriculated during the final years of Dr. William Sancroft’s (1582–1637) tenure as master at Emmanuel (1628–1637). The popular London preacher and future delegate to the Westminster Assembly, Dr. Richard Holdsworth (1590–1649), served as master throughout the remainder of Watson’s studies. Patrick Collinson assesses that Holdsworth was “probably the

137 Calamy, Nonconformist Memorial, 188.
139 Stubbings, Statutes of Walter Mildmay, 25, 60.
140 Stubbings, Statutes of Walter Mildmay, 3.
141 Stubbings, Statutes of Walter Mildmay, 59, cf. 76.
best master that Emmanuel ever had” as well as being a “great preacher” who “aroused real devotion” in his students.\footnote{Susan Bendall, Christopher Brooke and Patrick Collinson, A History of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Woodbridge 1999, 224, 225. 226, cf. John Morgan, Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes Towards Reason, Learning, and Education, 1560–1640, Cambridge 1986, 287 for Holdsworth’s ability to cultivate godliness in his students. Cf. John Ward, The Lives of the Professors of Gresham College, London, John Moore, 1740 (T145612), 63.} Holdsworth, the author of the Directions for a Student in the Universitie, establishes the principles for the undergraduate education\footnote{For a summary of the graduate study of theology see William T. Costello, The Scholastic Curriculum at Early Seventeenth–Century Cambridge, Cambridge, MA, 1958, 108–28.} around the four primary subjects of logic, ethics, physics and metaphysics (including theology). More insightful are the specific books that Holdsworth commended to his students for reading “that you may increase in Piety, & saving knowledge as well as in humane learning” specifically naming works by Bishop Joseph Hall, Richard Sibbes, John Preston, Robert Bolton, John Davenant, William Perkins, etc.\footnote{Richard Holdsworth, Directions for a Student in the Universitie in H. F. Fletcher, The Intellectual Development of John Milton, vol. 2, Urbana 1961, 640. For a helpful overview to Holdsworth’s Directions see pp. 84–88.} Further guidance is given for taking notes from the student’s reading and the creation of a “Common place book” that is to function as a treasury recording the best of their studies for both the present and future use in ministry.\footnote{Holdsworth, Directions for a Student in the Universitie, 650, 651.} The student’s commonplace book was also used in assisting them in listening to sermons and lectures.\footnote{Holdsworth, Directions for a Student in the Universitie, 652. For a detailed summary of one example of a commonplace book see Peter Lake, Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church, Cambridge 1982, 116–28.} Unfortunately there is no record of Watson’s commonplace books in the Emmanuel College library or archives.

The preaching they heard would have also shaped the students. No doubt Watson heard many sermons from Holdsworth but beyond that it is difficult to recreate a more specific list. Cambridge students were required to attend Great St. Mary’s, the University church, but there does not appear to be detailed records of those who preached. It is probable that Watson would have also heard Samuel Ward’s (1572–1643) sermons, master at Sidney Sussex College, the other Puritan college. Significantly both Holdsworth and Ward were strong royalists and that likely had some
bearing on Watson’s sharp criticism of the execution of Charles I. However, despite the reputation of Emmanuel College being a “nursery for Puritanism” opposing voices were already rising during Watson’s time. Benjamin Whichcote, one of the future Cambridge Platonists, served as a fellow of Emmanuel College and was a regular preacher beginning in 1636 at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge.148 Further the theological landscape was more variegated and inconsistent to the point that one historian has concluded “What is abundantly clear is that Emmanuel came in the 1630s and 1640s to contain every shade of theological opinion in the Protestant fold of the day, from high church to puritan to what we would call broad church.”149

Third, Watson demonstrates a deep appreciation for the Song of Songs, which has earlier been acknowledged as the premiere book of Christian mysticism. Wallace is certainly correct in his assessment that, “Clearly, erotic language and a fondness for the Song of Solomon in explicating the spiritual life and describing mystical experience were characteristic of many Puritan and Calvinist writers.”150 John Owen in his preface to James Durham’s popular commentary on the Song of Solomon accurately reflects the opinion of Watson and many other Puritans that this book “is one holy declaration of that mystically spiritual communion, that is between the great Bridegroom and his Spouse, the Lord Jesus Christ and his Church, and every believing soul that belongs thereunto”.151 Not only did Watson preach two major sermons on the Song of Solomon but he consistently employs numerous references to this book throughout all of his writings. He was acquainted with Bernard’s masterpiece on the Songs of Songs and twice cites a specific reference to it.152 This again reflects his appreciation for and adoption of the language of bridal mysticism of the western Catholic tradition.

148 Morgan, History University Cambridge, 525.
149 Morgan, History University Cambridge 475–76. For the growing presence and challenge of Laud and Arminianism in the 1630s at Cambridge University see Twigg, University of Cambridge, 29–31, 33–34.
151 Durham, Song of Solomon, 21.
Watson’s usage of Bernard and other medieval and patristic sources was possible due to the well–stocked library at Emmanuel College. The inventory of the library indicates that he would have had access to all of the sources that he mentioned in the development of his contemplative–mystical piety including the writings of Cassian, Gerson, Bonaventure, and especially his favorite, Bernard of Clairvaux.\textsuperscript{153} Some scholars note that the abundance of western Catholic writings could also be used in the weekly disputations that were required of students.\textsuperscript{154}

Fourth, a person’s friends are likely to influence an individuals’ growth and development not only as a pastor but also in their personal devotional life. This is an area that requires far more research to determine Watson’s friends and their possible formation of his piety. However, we do know that he was acquainted with or served in varying capacities of ministry with the following ministers: Ralph Robinson, from St. Stephen’s church, John Beadle, his father–in–law, Christopher Love, Simeon Ashe, William Bates, Edward Reynolds, Samuel Annesley, James Janeway, Peter Sterry, Stephen Charnock, Anthony Burgess, Thomas Manton, Thomas Goodwin, Richard Baxter, John Owen, and many more. While this list covers a rather broad spectrum regarding ecclesiastical and liturgical sensitivities it prompts at least two observations. First, Watson came in contact with these leaders at different times in his life and not all would have exerted the same degree of influence. Second, and far more importantly, Watson demonstrates the truth that the boundary lines between the various streams of Puritans nonconformity (i.e. Presbyterians, Independents, Congregationalists) was more fluid than scholars originally thought. Indeed, the same has been argued regarding the distinction between conformity and nonconformity.\textsuperscript{155} Additionally since Watson was predominately a ‘devotional’ writer concerned about piety that is likely a primary attraction to many of these fellow Puritans.

Given the robust nature of Watson’s contemplative–mystical piety an important question is whether there was a maturing of this theology and piety throughout his works or was it already well established in his


\textsuperscript{154} Bendall, \textit{History of Emmanue College}, 204-5.

\textsuperscript{155} Ryrie, \textit{Being Protestant in Reformation Britain}, especially 3–9.
earliest writings. Often 1662 is used as a fulcrum point for comparing the nature and texture of Puritan writings. While many of Watson’s most significant works were published after that time he had already penned a number of essential works before the Ejection. More importantly to the subject of his contemplative–mystical piety there does not appear to be any major transitions or expansion of his thinking. What is clear is that the specific subject of his writing was a more critical determinant of his piety than the time in which it was written. Therefore the Christians Charter (1655) and the Saints Delight (on meditation, 1657) have some rich illustrations of his contemplative–mystical theology, vocabulary, practices and experience. But the Divine Cordial (1663), the Godly Mans Picture (1666), Holy Eucharist (1668) and A Plea for the Godly (1672) also reflect a similar appreciation of the same themes and sources as evident in his earlier work. Since most of Watson’s writings were of a devotional nature one can observe a consistency of these themes across the time–span of his writing.

This raises the related question regarding the broader nature of contemplative–mystical piety within Puritanism. Since I have previously studied Isaac Ambrose I can offer a preliminary comparison between these two Presbyterian ministers. In many areas they parallel each other such as in their usage of the bridal language of the Song of Songs. While Ambrose never devoted a specific sermon to the book of Canticles as Watson, he repeatedly drew upon it in his writings. Likewise both men built their theology of affection on desire and delight in the Triune God. Clearly the ministry of the Holy Spirit and union with Christ occupied a central place in both of their theologies though Ambrose was more likely to use the specific language of spiritual marriage than Watson. Additionally Watson at times can be less precise in his usage of terminology. This was previously noted in his descriptions regarding the origin and growth of the believer’s union with Christ. There are places in his corpus that Watson hints that union with Christ must wait until heaven. But certainly this is a matter of fulfillment and not the point of origin that becomes clear once all of his passages on this topic are read together. Both ministers indicate the importance of spiritual duties or exercises by devoting full–length books to cultivating growth in godliness. More specifically both also write at length about the nature and importance of meditation including heavenly meditation that is foundational to a contemplative–mystical piety. The beatific vision that
significantly relates to heavenly mindedness is present in both authors as well. Though Ambrose tends to employ the more specific contemplative language of beholding and gazing on God than Watson.

There are also some distinctions that can be observed. Nowhere in Ambrose’s writings does he speak of spiritual inebriation as Watson does. Unlike Watson, Ambrose, similar to Calvin, emphasizes creation as one major arena in which to meditate upon and experience God. This highlights the most critical difference between our two Puritans, that Isaac Ambrose kept a diary and while it was destroyed he wove numerous accounts of the experiences of his personal and public life into his work on spiritual duties. Further, while both Watson and Ambrose stress the necessity of withdrawing into solitude to focus on God Ambrose actually took a thirty-day retreat each May in the woods to review his diary and practice spiritual duties. The extant records of his retreats and public ministry provides readers with a valuable window to examine at least some of his contemplative—mystical experiences. However, these variations should not imply different streams of Puritan contemplative—mystical piety as much as different emphases within a common stream. While the limits of space prevent a more detailed comparison of this topic it is instructive to recognize that neither Watson nor Ambrose reveal the strong appreciation for neoplatonism that is present in the contemplative—mystical writings of Peter Sterry.\textsuperscript{156} Obviously this serves as a reminder that there is much research that still needs to be done among the broad spectrum of Puritans who exhibit a contemplative—mystical piety.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this article Thomas Watson’s deep reliance upon medieval mysticism for shaping his own contemplative—mystical piety has been demonstrated. While Bernard is clearly his favorite he does reveal an appreciation for Gerson and Bonaventure as well. Beyond these medieval writers there are abundant references to Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome as well as awareness of Cassian, Gregory, Basil, Gregory Nanzianzus, etc. Further the references to Bernard indicate a broad based acceptance of the Cistercian monk’s devotional writings.

\textsuperscript{156} Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism*, especially 58–61. Wallace also underscores Sterry’s receptivity to some of Jacob Boehme’s theology. See pp. 79–81.
In every case where Watson cites these medieval and patristic writers he does so approvingly. However, that does not imply that he was blind to the doctrinal issues that the Puritans often gathered together under the label “popish” or “papal”. This provides a helpful reminder that the Puritan usage of medieval sources was predominantly limited to devotional literature. Puritans and other Protestants eschewed the doctrinal writings of Rome because of what they perceived to be distorted theology. One illustration of this is the Puritan retrieval of the western Catholic’s most popular devotional writing: Thomas à Kempis *Imitation of Christ*, and how it was adapted to fit the Puritan theological framework. The best-researched example of this is Maximilian von Habsburg’s study of the Protestant revisions of à Kempis *Imitation of Christ*. The primary areas in which Protestants revised the *Imitation of Christ* was by deleting book four on the mass. Protestants also reworked references to monasticism, since the Western Catholic Church excluded lay readers, they reformulated discussion on intercessory prayers to the saints, while still maintaining the importance of intercessory prayers, they clarified the teaching on purgatory and they reduced the strong emphasis upon human merit in relation to one’s salvation.

Significantly this paralleled similar cautionary concerns of Watson in his sermon against popery in which he listed thirteen errors that reflect these concerns of earlier Protestants plus veneration of the saints, ascribing that the Pope was the head of the Church, thus creating competition with Christ, violation of the second commandment, etc. It is important to realize that Watson was not alone in these concerns. The Morning Exercises at Cripplegate includes twenty-five different sermons on various aspects of the Puritan anxiety with the papists. Significantly these sermons were preached during the early 1660s when there was the

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renewed Puritan fear of King Charles II’s greater openness to Roman Catholicism.\footnote{161 John Spurr, \textit{English Puritanism 1603–1689}, Basingstoke 1998, 12, 146.}

That aside Watson recognized the rich reservoir of the mystical writings of the western Catholic Church. Where he believed it was consistent with sound theology he had no reservation of employing it since he and other Puritans believed that writers like Bernard of Clairvaux were a faithful witness to Scripture. Thomas Watson is not a name that is included when scholars speak of the “mystical element” of Puritanism, but surely his writings on the desire and delight of enjoyment of God demonstrate a legitimate and robust contemplative—mystical piety that must not be neglected not only in Puritan studies but more broadly in Christian spirituality!

Summary
Thomas Watson (1620-1686) was a prolific and popular English Puritan who was best known for his many devotional and practical writings as well as his posthumous \textit{A Body of Practical Divinity}, sermons on the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The \textit{ODNB} entry describes his writings to be “at times even mystical, and often expressed in ecstatic language.” In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the study of Christian mysticism, not only within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions but also within Protestantism as well. This article employs the term “contemplative—mystical piety” as a more appropriate label for exploring Watson’s piety as an example of Puritan piety. Watson’s teaching on union with Christ is derived from the bridal language of the Song of Songs and reveals a deep appreciation for Bernard of Clairvaux. Through the intentional efforts of meditation and other spiritual practices a person is able to experience the sweetness of communion and enjoyment of God. This study considers the possible formative sources that influenced the development of Watson’s vibrant contemplative—mystical piety. While this article will illustrate the Puritan dependence upon patristic and medieval sources and affirm that there are major points of continuity within the affective tradition of the Western Catholic Church, it will also demonstrate a legitimate Reformed expression of contemplative—mystical piety.

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