

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond Confessional Constraints: A Discursive Analysis of Bloomer's Theological Project and Contemporary Approaches to Kabbalah

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive critical analysis of Brother Gilbert (Athol) Bloomer's 2013 theological corpus, examining his ambitious attempt to synthesize Jewish mystical traditions with Catholic sacramental theology through what he terms "heretical kabbalah." Drawing on contemporary scholarship in Jewish mysticism, religious studies methodology, postcolonial criticism, and interfaith theological dialogue, this analysis evaluates Bloomer's four major works against the methodological standards established by post-Scholem Kabbalah studies.

While Bloomer's extensive academic credentials and unique Hebrew Catholic identity enable remarkable insights into hidden Jewish dimensions of Catholic mysticism—particularly his innovations in "converso hermeneutics" and his controversial Frankist hypothesis—his confessional commitment to Catholic orthodoxy ultimately constrains his interpretive horizons in ways that prevent genuine encounter with Jewish mystical alterity.

The study demonstrates how Bloomer's approach reproduces traditional supersessionist patterns despite sophisticated rhetorical innovations, subordinating Jewish sources to predetermined Christian theological categories. Through comparative analysis with contemporary academic approaches (Wolfson, Idel, Magid, Fishbane) and alternative therapeutic appropriations of kabbalistic sources developed by Julian Ungar-Sargon, this research illuminates broader methodological challenges facing interfaith theological engagement.

The analysis reveals how confessional constraints prevent authentic theological dialogue while pointing toward possibilities for "critical participation" that could honor both scholarly rigor and existential engagement without apologetic reduction. Using figures like Jonathan Eybeschütz as test cases for theological courage, the study argues that future mystical theology requires post-traditional approaches that allow ancient sources to transform rather than merely confirm contemporary assumptions. This work contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between scholarly objectivity and religious commitment while establishing new frameworks for evaluating contemporary appropriations of mystical traditions.

Keywords: Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, interfaith theology, Hebrew Catholicism, confessional constraints, converso mysticism, Frankist movement, theological methodology, postcolonial criticism, religious studies, Sophiology, tzimtzum, therapeutic spirituality, Jonathan Eybeschütz, critical participation.

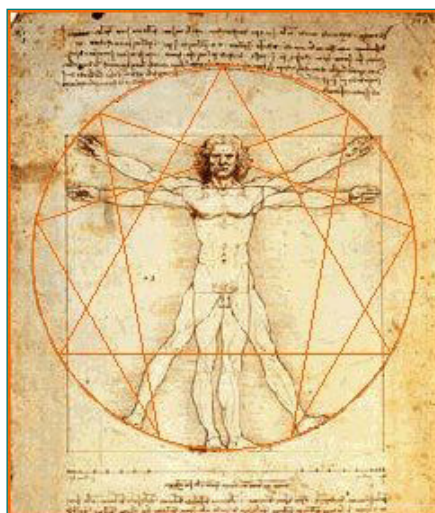
1. Introduction

Brother Gilbert (Athol) Bloomer's theological project represents an ambitious yet ultimately constrained attempt to synthesize multiple streams of Jewish mysticism with Catholic sacramental theology through

what he terms "heretical kabbalah." His extensive academic credentials—including a B.A. from the University of Western Australia in History, English, Ancient History and Music, a Graduate Diploma in Education from Australian Catholic University, a

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Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Notre Dame University Fremantle, and a recently completed Master of Theological Studies from ACU—reflect the breadth of scholarship underlying his synthetic approach. His educational formation extends beyond formal university study to include philosophical and theological units from three Catholic schools of theology in the Philippines, Torah and Jewish studies in Australian and Jerusalem yeshivot, and Modern Hebrew language studies at two Hebrew ulpan in Jerusalem.

This unique educational trajectory reflects Bloomer's personal identity as a Hebrew Catholic of Anglo-Jewish and Anglo-Celtic ancestry, who in 2010 became a consecrated brother in a Catholic community and now serves as the Littlest Brother (superior) of the brothers living at St Joseph's Hidden Place in a hidden valley in Tasmania. This biographical context illuminates both the experiential foundation and the institutional constraints that shape his theological project.

Across four major works spanning 2013—*The Church as Sophia* (October 30), *A Jewish and Marian Reading of St John of the Cross* (September 16), *Eizeh Tikkun! Rebbe Nachman and Reparation*, and *Hasidut: Towards a Practical Theology of Hebrew Catholic Spirituality*—Bloomer develops an increasingly sophisticated yet methodologically problematic framework for integrating Jewish mystical tradition within Roman Catholic sacramental theology. His personal journey from Jewish studies through Catholic consecration provides both the motivation and the limitation for his theological synthesis, enabling profound insights into the hidden connections between Jewish and Christian mystical traditions while constraining his interpretive horizons within predetermined confessional boundaries.

The critical assessment of Bloomer's corpus reveals a complex negotiation between scholarly erudition and confessional commitment that raises fundamental questions about the possibility of authentic interfaith theological dialogue. Recent scholarship in Jewish mysticism, particularly the post-Scholem revolution in Kabbalah studies, has established methodological standards that expose both the promise and the limitations of Bloomer's approach. Contemporary figures like Elliot Wolfson, Moshe Idel, Shaul Magid, and the Fishbanes have demonstrated that rigorous engagement with Jewish mystical sources requires methodological sophistication that can address simultaneously their historical particularity, literary complexity, experiential dimensions, and capacity for contemporary theological appropriation without reducing them to apologetic instruments.

Against these scholarly standards, Bloomer's work emerges as a significant yet constrained attempt to bridge Jewish and Christian mystical traditions through what might be termed "confessional synthesis." While his erudition and historical insights often surpass contemporary academic work in breadth and synthetic ambition, his theological conclusions remain predetermined by institutional loyalties that prevent genuine encounter with the alterity of Jewish mystical experience. This fundamental tension between scholarly method and confessional commitment illuminates broader questions about the conditions under which authentic interfaith theological dialogue becomes possible in the contemporary academic and religious landscape.

2. Methodological Constraints

Brother Gilbert Bloomer's educational trajectory reveals the complex intellectual formation that both enables and constrains his theological project. His

undergraduate studies at the University of Western Australia in History, English, Ancient History, and Music provided the broad humanistic foundation evident in his sophisticated literary analysis and historical imagination. The combination of historical training with literary sensitivity appears particularly significant for his later development of what might be termed “converso hermeneutics”—his ability to detect hidden Jewish mystical dimensions within Catholic mystical texts.

However, contemporary scholarship in religious studies, particularly the work of scholars like Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald, has highlighted how traditional theological education often creates methodological blind spots that prevent genuine critical engagement with religious sources (26, 27). McCutcheon's critique of the “insider problem” in religious studies illuminates how confessional commitment can predetermine interpretive conclusions in ways that compromise scholarly integrity (26). Bloomer's graduate theological training at Notre Dame University Fremantle and Australian Catholic University, while providing sophisticated technical knowledge of Catholic systematic theology, appears to have reinforced rather than challenged his confessional assumptions about the relationship between Jewish and Christian mystical traditions.

The tension between scholarly method and religious commitment becomes particularly evident in Bloomer's engagement with Jewish sources. His extensive study in Australian and Jerusalem yeshivot demonstrates genuine commitment to understanding Jewish mystical traditions from within their own cultural and religious contexts. Contemporary scholars like David Ellenson and Jeffrey Rubenstein have emphasized how authentic engagement with rabbinic and mystical literature requires immersion in the cultural contexts and interpretive methods that shaped these texts (28, 29). Bloomer's Hebrew language training and yeshiva experience suggest the kind of cultural competency that such engagement requires.

However, as Steven Katz has argued in his influential work on mystical experience, the interpreter's religious and cultural presuppositions inevitably shape the meanings discovered in mystical texts (30). Bloomer's position as a consecrated Catholic brother creates institutional pressures that favor interpretations supporting Catholic theological claims over those that might challenge Christian assumptions about Jewish

mysticism. This tension between scholarly method and institutional loyalty reflects broader problems in contemporary religious studies identified by scholars like Tomoko Masuzawa, whose *The Invention of World Religions* demonstrates how academic study of religion has often served apologetic rather than critical purposes (31).

3. The Hebrew Catholic Identity Crisis

Bloomer's self-identification as a “Hebrew Catholic” positions him within a complex theological and cultural category that has received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades. Mark Kinzer's work on “postmissionary Messianic Judaism” and the studies of Hebrew Catholics by scholars like David Moss have highlighted the unique challenges faced by individuals who attempt to maintain both Jewish identity and Christian theological commitment (32, 33). This dual religious identity creates both opportunities and constraints for theological reflection.

On one hand, Hebrew Catholic identity enables the kind of bilingual theological competency that allows Bloomer to detect connections between Jewish and Christian mystical traditions invisible to scholars working from purely Christian perspectives. His analysis of converso mysticism and his identification of Frankist influences on Catholic devotional traditions exemplify insights that become possible only through sophisticated knowledge of both religious systems.

However, contemporary scholarship on religious identity, particularly the work of Paul Connerton and Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory, suggests that religious identity is constructed through processes of selective remembering and forgetting that serve present communal needs rather than historical accuracy (34, 35). Hebrew Catholic identity may require particular forms of selective interpretation that emphasize continuities between Judaism and Christianity while minimizing discontinuities that might challenge the viability of dual religious commitment.

David Novak's influential work *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* has highlighted how authentic interfaith theological engagement requires willingness to be challenged and potentially transformed by encounter with religious alterity (36). The institutional pressures associated with Hebrew Catholic identity may prevent the kind of genuine openness to Jewish otherness that such transformation requires. Bloomer's consistent interpretation of Jewish mystical insights as pointing

toward or preparing for Christian fulfillment suggests the kind of interpretive predetermination that prevents authentic dialogue.

4. Institutional Context

Bloomer's position as "Littlest Brother" of a Catholic religious community in Tasmania provides crucial context for understanding both the motivations and the limitations of his theological project. Contemporary scholarship on religious communities, particularly the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann on the social construction of reality, has emphasized how institutional contexts shape the possibilities for theological reflection (37). Religious communities create both supportive environments for theological exploration and constraining pressures that limit the directions such exploration can take.

The Tasmanian location of Bloomer's community—described as "St Joseph's Hidden Place in a hidden valley"—suggests both physical and symbolic distance from mainstream academic theological discourse. This geographical isolation may provide freedom from immediate institutional surveillance while creating intellectual isolation that limits exposure to critical scholarly perspectives. Contemporary studies of religious intellectuals, such as Mark Schwehn's work on the relationship between faith and academic inquiry, have highlighted how institutional context significantly affects the quality and direction of theological reflection (38).

However, Bloomer's continued engagement with academic theological discourse through conference presentations and scholarly writing suggests attempts to maintain connection with broader intellectual communities despite geographical isolation. His integration of contemporary philosophical perspectives, particularly Emmanuel Levinas's work on ethical transcendence, demonstrates awareness of current theological developments beyond traditional Catholic systematic theology.

The tension between institutional loyalty and intellectual freedom becomes particularly evident in Bloomer's treatment of controversial theological questions. His willingness to engage with figures like Jacob Frank and Jonathan Eybeschutz—whose teachings challenged orthodox Jewish and Christian theological boundaries—suggests genuine intellectual courage. However, his consistent interpretation of such figures as preparing for or pointing toward Catholic truth reveals the constraints imposed by his institutional commitments.

5. Contemporary Kabbalah Studies and Methodology

The academic study of Jewish mysticism has undergone fundamental transformation since Gershom Scholem's pioneering work established Kabbalah as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry. Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* created conceptual frameworks that made systematic study of Jewish mystical literature possible while establishing historical methodologies that revealed the social and cultural contexts shaping mystical movements (39). However, subsequent scholarship has identified significant limitations in Scholem's approach that illuminate the methodological challenges facing contemporary interpreters of Jewish mystical traditions.

Moshe Idel's revolutionary *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* fundamentally challenged Scholem's historical-philological approach by demonstrating the importance of phenomenological analysis for understanding mystical experience (40). Idel's emphasis on the experiential dimensions of kabbalistic practice revealed continuous streams of mystical technique extending from antiquity through modernity, challenging Scholem's emphasis on historical rupture and crisis as primary explanatory categories. This phenomenological turn has established new standards for scholarly engagement with mystical texts that require attention to both their intellectual content and their practical dimensions.

Contemporary scholars like Elliot Wolfson have further developed this phenomenological approach through sophisticated integration of postmodern hermeneutical theory with traditional textual analysis (41, 42). Wolfson's demonstration that "experience and exegesis" are inseparable in mystical texts provides hermeneutical keys that unlock dimensions of meaning invisible to purely historical approaches. His willingness to follow mystical logic to its most challenging conclusions—including his analysis of the androcentric eroticism underlying kabbalistic visionary experience and his exploration of presence/absence dialectics—exemplifies the intellectual courage required for authentic engagement with mystical traditions.

The methodological sophistication achieved by contemporary Kabbalah scholarship creates standards against which Bloomer's work must be evaluated. Where Wolfson maintains rigorous scholarly discipline while exploring the most transgressive

dimensions of mystical experience, Bloomer's confessional constraints prevent genuine encounter with the radical implications of Jewish mystical theology. His tendency to domesticate challenging mystical insights through Christian theological categories reflects the kind of apologetic reduction that contemporary scholarship has moved beyond.

6. Literary-Critical Innovations

The contribution of scholars like Eitan Fishbane and Michael Fishbane represents another crucial development in contemporary Kabbalah studies that illuminates the limitations of Bloomer's approach. Eitan Fishbane's *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* demonstrates how treating mystical texts as literature—specifically as works of imaginative construction rather than simply repositories of theological doctrine—opens new possibilities for understanding how mystical truth emerges through creative interpretive processes (43).

Fishbane's analysis of characterization, dramatic speech, and narrative structure in Zoharic literature provides methodological tools for literary-theological analysis that neither Bloomer nor purely historical approaches effectively utilize. This literary-critical method reveals how mystical texts create meaning through narrative strategies that engage readers in transformative interpretive processes, suggesting that the theological significance of mystical literature lies not in its doctrinal content but in its capacity to generate new forms of religious experience through acts of reading.

Michael Fishbane's hermeneutical theology, articulated in works like *Sacred Attunements*, demonstrates how traditional Jewish mystical categories can inform contemporary theological reflection without requiring confessional commitment to their truth claims (44). His emphasis on "inner biblical exegesis" and the generative power of textual interpretation provides models for how mystical insights can be appropriated in postmodern contexts without falling into either fundamentalist literalism or reductive historicism.

The Fishbanes' methodological innovations suggest possibilities for theological appropriation of mystical traditions that avoid both confessional reduction and academic detachment. Their work demonstrates how engaging mystical sources through literary-critical analysis can honor both their historical particularity and their capacity to generate contemporary theological insight without requiring either apologetic defense or therapeutic instrumentalization.

7. Critical Postmodernism and Political Analysis

Shaul Magid's contribution to contemporary Kabbalah studies exemplifies what might be termed "critical postmodern" engagement with Jewish mysticism that integrates rigorous scholarly analysis with contemporary cultural and political critique (45, 46). Magid's analysis of Lurianic myth as serving interpretive rather than cosmological functions challenges traditional approaches that treat kabbalistic cosmology as literal description of metaphysical reality. His exploration of antinomian tendencies within Hasidism reveals political dimensions of mystical movements that purely spiritual interpretations miss.

Most significantly, Magid's willingness to examine the relationship between Jewish mysticism and contemporary cultural issues—including race theory, American Judaism, and anti-Zionist politics—demonstrates how mystical categories can illuminate contemporary cultural analysis without requiring their subordination to predetermined political or theological agendas (47). His autobiographical integration of personal spiritual journey with rigorous scholarly analysis provides models for existentially engaged scholarship that maintains critical distance from its subject matter.

Magid's approach reveals possibilities for politically engaged scholarship that maintains both critical rigor and existential investment. His demonstration that mystical traditions can inform contemporary cultural critique without losing their historical specificity suggests methodological alternatives to both apologetic appropriation and academic detachment. This model illuminates the limitations of Bloomer's confessional synthesis while pointing toward more promising directions for contemporary engagement with mystical traditions.

8. Comparative Mysticism and Interfaith Studies

Recent developments in comparative mysticism have established methodological frameworks that further illuminate the challenges facing Bloomer's interfaith theological project. Scholars like Raimundo Panikkar and John Cobb have developed sophisticated approaches to interfaith dialogue that avoid both confessional triumphalism and relativistic reductionism (48, 49). These approaches emphasize the importance of maintaining tension between commitment to particular traditions and openness

to transformation through encounter with religious otherness.

However, contemporary critics of comparative mysticism, particularly Steven Katz and his associates, have challenged claims about universal mystical experience by demonstrating how cultural and religious contexts fundamentally shape mystical phenomena (50). This “contextualist” approach suggests that authentic engagement with mystical traditions from outside one’s own religious context requires extraordinary methodological sophistication to avoid projecting foreign categories onto culturally specific phenomena.

The debate between “perennialist” and “contextualist” approaches to mystical studies creates methodological challenges for any attempt at interfaith mystical theology. Bloomer’s approach tends toward a modified perennialism that identifies underlying spiritual realities common to Jewish and Christian mystical traditions while asserting the superior adequacy of Christian theological categories for understanding these realities. This position combines the weaknesses of both perennialist and contextualist approaches while avoiding their respective strengths.

Contemporary developments in postcolonial theory, particularly the work of scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha on cultural translation and hybridity, provide additional critical perspectives on interfaith theological projects (51, 52). These approaches highlight how attempts to translate between religious traditions often reproduce power relations that privilege dominant cultural perspectives while marginalizing subaltern voices. Bloomer’s consistent interpretation of Jewish mystical insights as pointing toward Christian fulfillment exemplifies the kind of theological colonialism that postcolonial critics have identified.

9. Russian Orthodoxy and Catholic Mariology

The Church as Sophia establishes the theological architecture that informs all subsequent developments in Bloomer’s thought. His sophisticated engagement with Russian Orthodox Sophiology—particularly the work of Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky—demonstrates genuine scholarly competence in a complex and controversial theological tradition. However, contemporary scholarship on Russian religious thought has raised significant questions about the methodological assumptions

underlying Sophiological theology that illuminate problems with Bloomer’s appropriation.

Rowan Williams’s influential work on Russian religious thought has highlighted how Sophiological theology emerged from specific cultural and political contexts in late Imperial Russia that shaped its theological concerns in ways that may not translate directly to contemporary Western contexts (53). The Russian emphasis on national religious identity and the mystical significance of suffering reflected particular historical circumstances rather than universal theological insights. Bloomer’s appropriation of Sophiological categories for contemporary Catholic theology may involve projecting culturally specific concepts onto different religious and cultural contexts.

Contemporary feminist theological criticism of Sophiological theology, particularly the work of scholars like Amy Plantinga Pauw and Sarah Coakley, has identified problematic gender assumptions underlying traditional treatments of divine Wisdom as feminine (54, 55). These critics argue that Sophiological theology often reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal religious structures by idealizing feminine receptivity and submission while maintaining masculine divine authority. Bloomer’s integration of Sophiological categories with Catholic Mariology may reproduce these problematic gender dynamics despite his apparent commitment to honoring feminine dimensions of divinity.

However, Bloomer’s most significant contribution in this essay lies in his integration of Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of “ethical transcendence” with traditional Sophiological categories. This methodological innovation enables engagement with contemporary philosophical discourse while maintaining connection to traditional mystical theology. His recognition that authentic spiritual transformation requires encounter with otherness rather than confirmation of existing beliefs demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the philosophical challenges facing contemporary religious thought.

The integration of Levinasian ethics with Sophiological theology creates possibilities for understanding how the Church might serve as a locus of encounter with divine otherness rather than institutional defense of religious authority. This insight suggests directions for ecclesiastical reform that honor both mystical tradition and contemporary ethical demands. However, Bloomer’s ultimate subordination of this ethical insight to traditional Catholic ecclesiological claims prevents full development of its radical implications.

10. Converso Mysticism

A Jewish and Marian Reading of St John of the Cross represents Bloomer's most methodologically innovative work, developing what might be termed "converso hermeneutics" that reveals hidden Jewish mystical dimensions within apparently orthodox Catholic texts. This methodological approach has significant potential for illuminating previously invisible connections between Jewish and Christian mystical traditions while raising important questions about the relationship between public religious identity and private spiritual practice.

Contemporary scholarship on Spanish converso culture, particularly the work of historians like David Gitlitz and Benzion Netanyahu, has established the complex strategies through which Jewish families maintained cultural and religious continuity despite forced conversion to Christianity (56, 57). These studies reveal how converso families often maintained dual religious identities that enabled survival within Christian society while preserving Jewish cultural and religious elements. Bloomer's analysis of the converso backgrounds of figures like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila builds upon this historical foundation while extending it in theological directions.

However, Bloomer's theological interpretation of converso mysticism reveals the apologetic constraints that limit his analysis. Rather than exploring how converso experience might have challenged or transformed Catholic theological categories, Bloomer consistently interprets Jewish mystical elements as preparation for fuller Catholic spiritual realization. This interpretive choice prevents him from considering the more radical possibility that converso mysticism represented genuine religious innovation that transcended the boundaries of both Jewish and Christian orthodox traditions.

Bloomer's detailed analysis of the relationship between the Bahir's treatment of mystical darkness and St. John's concept of the "Dark Night" demonstrates the concrete textual work that validates his broader theoretical claims. His identification of specific parallels between kabbalistic teachings about Miriam's Well, the Zohar (dark light), and the Shekhinah as "Dark Lady of Carmel" with St. John's mystical theology provides evidence for Jewish influence that goes beyond vague thematic similarities.

Contemporary scholarship on the transmission of religious ideas, particularly the work of cultural historians like Peter Burke and Roger Chartier, has emphasized the importance of identifying specific mechanisms through which cultural transmission occurs (58, 59). Bloomer's analysis of how converso families might have transmitted kabbalistic knowledge through domestic religious practices and spiritual direction provides plausible explanations for the Jewish mystical elements he identifies in Catholic mystical texts.

However, the theological conclusions Bloomer draws from this historical analysis remain problematic. His interpretation of converso mystical influence as divine preparation for Catholic spiritual fulfillment reproduces supersessionist logic that prevents genuine appreciation of Jewish mystical autonomy. Contemporary Jewish scholars like Moshe Idel and Elliot Wolfson have demonstrated the theological sophistication and experiential authenticity of Jewish mystical traditions that resist reduction to preparation for non-Jewish spiritual realization (60, 61).

11. The Frankist Hypothesis

Eizeh Tikkun! Rebbe Nachman and Reparation presents Bloomer's most controversial thesis: that the mass conversion of Jacob Frank's followers to Catholicism in 1760 introduced "hidden heaven" into European Catholic mysticism that influenced subsequent developments in Catholic Mariology and devotional practice. This hypothesis demonstrates remarkable historical imagination while raising fundamental questions about the relationship between sectarian religious innovation and mainstream religious development.

Contemporary scholarship on Jacob Frank and the Frankist movement, particularly the groundbreaking work of Pawel Maciejko, has established the radical theological innovations that characterized this controversial 18th-century Jewish sectarian movement (62). Frank's teachings represented perhaps the most antinomian development in Jewish religious history, advocating the deliberate violation of Jewish law as a means of hastening messianic redemption. The movement's eventual mass conversion to Catholicism created unprecedented opportunities for Jewish sectarian theology to influence Catholic religious culture.

Bloomer's analysis of how Frankist theological emphases—particularly their devotion to the "Divine

Mother” and their interpretation of the Zohar as a Marian text—might have influenced the development of 19th-century Catholic Mariology demonstrates sophisticated understanding of how sectarian religious movements can influence mainstream religious development. His suggestion that Frankist influence contributed to the papal declarations of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950) provides a plausible explanation for the increasing emphasis on Marian devotion in modern Catholicism.

However, Bloomer's interpretation of Frankist influence reveals the same apologetic constraints that limit his other work. Rather than exploring how Frankist antinomian theology might have challenged orthodox Catholic moral and theological categories, Bloomer interprets Frankist contributions as divine preparation for fuller Catholic truth. This interpretation misses the genuinely radical character of Frankist theology and its potential for transforming rather than simply confirming Catholic religious understanding.

Contemporary scholars of religious innovation, particularly the work of sociologists like Rodney Stark and Roger Finke on religious movements, have emphasized how sectarian innovations often generate broader religious changes through complex processes of cultural transmission and institutional adaptation (63). Bloomer's Frankist hypothesis suggests one mechanism through which such transmission might have occurred, but his theological interpretation of this process remains constrained by confessional assumptions about Catholic spiritual superiority.

The most significant limitation of Bloomer's Frankist analysis lies in his failure to engage seriously with the antinomian dimensions of Frankist theology. Frank's advocacy of deliberate transgression as spiritual practice represented a fundamental challenge to both Jewish and Christian moral categories that cannot be easily domesticated through Catholic theological appropriation. Contemporary scholars like Elliot Wolfson and Shaul Magid have demonstrated how antinomian mystical traditions often generate genuine theological innovations that resist incorporation into orthodox religious frameworks (64, 65).

12. Systematic Theology

Ethical Transcendence and Hasidut presents Bloomer's most systematic attempt to develop a comprehensive theological framework for what he terms “Hebrew Catholic spirituality.” This work

demonstrates the synthetic ambition of his theological project while revealing the fundamental tensions between Jewish mystical anthropology and Catholic sacramental theology that such synthesis involves.

Bloomer's framework for Hebrew Catholic spirituality draws heavily on the thirteen middot (qualities) of Hasidic spiritual development as interpreted through Emmanuel Levinas's concept of “ethical transcendence” and Glenn Morrison's “Trinitarian praxis of holiness.” This integration of Jewish mystical psychology with contemporary philosophical theology and Catholic systematic theology demonstrates remarkable synthetic sophistication while raising questions about the coherence of such complex theoretical combinations.

Contemporary criticism of synthetic theological approaches, particularly the work of theologians like Kathryn Tanner and David Tracy on theological method, has highlighted the importance of maintaining critical awareness of the cultural and religious contexts that shape theological concepts (66, 67). The combination of Hasidic middot with Levinasian ethics and Catholic sacramental theology involves bringing together concepts that emerged from very different religious and cultural contexts with potentially incompatible theological assumptions.

Bloomer's identification of the “Hidden Tzaddik” with the “Messiah son of Joseph” and his integration of this figure with Catholic Christological categories exemplifies the challenges facing any attempt at Jewish-Christian theological synthesis. The Hasidic concept of the tzaddik as a human figure who achieves extraordinary spiritual realization while remaining fundamentally human differs significantly from Catholic Christological doctrines that assert the divine nature of Christ. Bloomer's synthesis requires either reducing Hasidic anthropology to Catholic categories or stretching Catholic Christology beyond orthodox boundaries.

However, Bloomer's systematic work also contains insights that point toward more promising directions for contemporary theological reflection. His emphasis on “ethical transcendence” as the goal of spiritual development aligns with contemporary theological emphases on social justice and political engagement that have emerged from liberation theology and political theology movements. His integration of mystical practice with ethical commitment suggests possibilities for spiritual development that avoids the otherworldly escapism that critics often associate with mystical traditions.

The most significant limitation of Bloomer's systematic theology lies in its failure to address the institutional and cultural challenges that Hebrew Catholic identity creates. Contemporary scholarship on religious identity, particularly the work of sociologists like Peter Berger and Grace Davie on religious belonging in modern societies, has emphasized how dual religious identity creates cognitive and social tensions that require ongoing negotiation (68, 69). Bloomer's theological framework provides spiritual practices and theological concepts but fails to address the practical challenges of maintaining Hebrew Catholic identity within both Jewish and Catholic communities.

13. The Problem of Confessional Constraints

The fundamental limitation of Bloomer's theological project lies in what might be termed the "confessional constraint problem"—the way in which institutional religious loyalty predetermines interpretive conclusions in ways that prevent genuine encounter with religious otherness. This problem has been identified by contemporary scholars of religious studies as a persistent challenge facing theological scholarship that attempts to maintain both academic rigor and religious commitment.

Russell McCutcheon's influential critique of the "insider problem" in religious studies highlights how confessional commitment creates methodological blind spots that compromise scholarly integrity (70). McCutcheon argues that scholars who maintain religious commitment to the traditions they study inevitably interpret those traditions in ways that confirm rather than challenge their existing beliefs. This creates a circular hermeneutical process that prevents genuine learning from religious sources.

However, critics of McCutcheon's approach, particularly scholars like Thomas Tweed and Manuel Vásquez, have argued that complete religious detachment may create different forms of interpretive distortion by preventing the kind of existential engagement that understanding religious traditions requires (71, 72). Their work suggests that the challenge for contemporary religious studies lies not in eliminating religious commitment but in developing forms of critical religious engagement that maintain both scholarly rigor and existential authenticity.

Bloomer's work illustrates both the possibilities and the limitations of confessionally committed scholarship. His deep personal investment in both Jewish and Christian mystical traditions enables

insights that purely academic approaches might miss. His identification of hidden Jewish elements in Catholic mystical texts and his analysis of historical connections between diverse mystical movements demonstrate the kind of synthetic vision that committed engagement can generate.

However, Bloomer's confessional commitment to Catholic truth claims ultimately prevents him from allowing Jewish mystical traditions to challenge or transform his Christian theological assumptions. His consistent interpretation of Jewish mystical insights as pointing toward or preparing for Catholic spiritual realization reproduces the kind of supersessionist logic that has characterized Christian theological appropriation of Jewish traditions throughout history.

14. Methodological Alternatives: Critical Participation

Contemporary scholarship in religious studies has developed several methodological approaches that suggest alternatives to both uncritical confessional commitment and detached academic analysis. The concept of "critical participation" developed by scholars like Michael Fishbane and Paul Ricoeur offers possibilities for engaging religious traditions that maintain both scholarly rigor and existential authenticity without requiring confessional commitment to particular religious authorities (73, 74).

Critical participation involves what Ricoeur terms a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that subjects religious claims to rigorous critical analysis while maintaining openness to the transformative potential of religious traditions (75). This approach recognizes that authentic engagement with religious traditions requires willingness to be challenged and potentially transformed by encounter with religious otherness, but it resists the kind of uncritical acceptance that confessional approaches often require.

Michael Fishbane's model of "hermeneutical theology" provides a concrete example of how critical participation might work in practice (76). Fishbane demonstrates how traditional Jewish mystical categories can inform contemporary theological reflection without requiring confessional commitment to Orthodox Jewish religious authority. His approach maintains critical distance from traditional religious claims while exploring their capacity to generate contemporary insight and spiritual transformation.

Julian Ungar-Sargon's therapeutic appropriation of kabbalistic sources represents another example of critical participation that avoids both confessional constraint and academic detachment. Ungar-Sargon's analysis of *tzimtzum* as involving "divine unconsciousness" and his exploration of therapeutic space as locus of divine concealment (97, 98) demonstrate how mystical insights can inform contemporary practice without requiring their subordination to traditional religious authorities.

Ungar-Sargon's engagement with figures like Jonathan Eybeschütz exemplifies the kind of theological courage that critical participation requires. Rather than domesticating Eybeschütz's radical theology of divine "thoughtlessness" through apologetic interpretation, Ungar-Sargon's approach allows these insights to challenge conventional theological categories in ways that generate new possibilities for understanding divine action and human suffering (99).

15. Postcolonial Criticism and Theological Method

Contemporary postcolonial criticism provides additional critical perspectives on interfaith theological projects that illuminate the limitations of Bloomer's approach. Scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and R.S. Sugirtharajah have developed sophisticated analyses of how cultural translation often reproduces colonial power relations that privilege dominant cultural perspectives while marginalizing subaltern voices (77, 78, 79).

Postcolonial critics have identified several problematic patterns in cross-cultural theological appropriation that appear in Bloomer's work. The tendency to interpret non-Christian religious traditions as preparation for Christian truth reproduces the temporal hierarchy that places Christianity as the fulfillment toward which other traditions point. This "preparatio evangelica" model has been a persistent feature of Christian theological appropriation of other religious traditions throughout history.

Additionally, postcolonial critics have highlighted how theological appropriation often involves extracting particular elements from their original cultural contexts and reinterpreting them within foreign cultural frameworks. Bloomer's appropriation of kabbalistic concepts for Catholic theological purposes exemplifies this pattern by removing Jewish mystical insights from their original religious and cultural contexts and subordinating them to Catholic theological categories.

However, postcolonial theory also suggests possibilities for more equitable forms of interfaith theological engagement. Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" points toward forms of cultural mixing that create genuinely new possibilities rather than simply extending dominant cultural patterns (80). This suggests that authentic interfaith theology might involve the creation of new theological categories that transcend the boundaries of traditional religious systems rather than the appropriation of one tradition by another.

The challenge for contemporary interfaith theology lies in developing approaches that can generate genuine theological innovation through encounter between religious traditions without reproducing colonial patterns of cultural domination. This requires methodological sophistication that can maintain awareness of power relations while remaining open to transformative possibilities that emerge from interfaith encounter.

16. Feminist and Liberation Theological Critiques

Contemporary feminist and liberation theological criticism provides additional critical perspectives on Bloomer's theological project that illuminate its limitations while pointing toward alternative possibilities. Feminist theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether have developed sophisticated analyses of how traditional theological categories often reinforce patriarchal power structures despite apparent commitment to spiritual equality (81, 82).

Bloomer's emphasis on Sophiological theology and his integration of Jewish mystical teachings about the divine feminine might appear to address feminist concerns about the masculine bias in traditional Christian theology. However, feminist critics have argued that simply adding feminine divine imagery to traditional theological frameworks often reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal religious structures by idealizing feminine receptivity and submission while maintaining masculine divine authority.

Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino have emphasized the importance of analyzing theological reflection from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed communities (83, 84). Their work suggests that authentic theological reflection must address the social and political dimensions of religious belief rather than focusing

exclusively on individual spiritual development or theoretical theological questions.

Bloomer's theological project, despite its sophisticated theoretical development, remains largely disconnected from analysis of social and political issues that affect contemporary religious communities. His emphasis on mystical experience and theological synthesis addresses primarily the spiritual and intellectual concerns of religious elites rather than the practical needs of ordinary religious believers or marginalized communities.

However, liberation theological criticism also suggests possibilities for developing more politically engaged forms of mystical theology. The integration of mystical practice with social justice commitment that has emerged from Latin American liberation theology demonstrates how spiritual development can inform rather than distract from political engagement. This model suggests directions for developing Hebrew Catholic spirituality that addresses contemporary social and political challenges rather than focusing exclusively on individual spiritual development.

17. Beyond Confessional Constraints

My attempt to appropriate kabbalistic sources represents a different approach to contemporary engagement with Jewish mystical traditions that avoids many of the confessional constraints limiting Bloomer's project while creating new possibilities for mystical practice and understanding. This approach demonstrates how ancient mystical insights can inform contemporary therapeutic practice without requiring their subordination to traditional religious authorities or predetermined theological systems.

The theoretical foundation of this therapeutic approach rests on sophisticated phenomenological analysis of kabbalistic concepts, particularly the doctrine of *tzimtzum* (divine contraction), that reveals their psychological and therapeutic implications without reducing them to purely psychological categories. Our analysis of *tzimtzum* as involving "divine unconsciousness" demonstrates how kabbalistic theology can illuminate the structure of therapeutic space and the dynamics of healing relationships in ways that traditional theological and psychological approaches miss (97, 98).

Contemporary scholars of religion and psychology, particularly the work of figures like Ann Ulanov and Christopher Bryant on the relationship between spirituality and psychotherapy, have emphasized the

importance of integrating spiritual and psychological perspectives for understanding human healing and transformation (85, 86).

The therapeutic application of kabbalistic insights also demonstrates possibilities for contemporary mystical practice that transcends traditional religious boundaries. Rather than requiring commitment to Orthodox Jewish religious authority or Christian theological categories, our therapeutic approach enables individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to engage with mystical insights in ways that inform their own individual contemporary spiritual and psychological development.

However, our therapeutic approach also faces methodological challenges that parallel those confronting Bloomer's confessional synthesis. The instrumentalization of mystical traditions for therapeutic purposes may involve forms of cultural appropriation that extract mystical insights from their original religious contexts in ways that distort their meaning and significance. Contemporary critics of therapeutic spirituality, particularly scholars like Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, have argued that the therapeutic appropriation of religious traditions often reduces complex spiritual systems to individual consumer products (87).

18. The Eybeschutz Case Study: Radical Precedent and Theological Innovation

The enigmatic figure of Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz (c. 1690-1764) and his controversial work *Va-avo ha-Yom el ha-Ayin* ("I Came This Day to the Spring") provides a crucial test case for evaluating both Bloomer's and our theological approaches to radical mystical traditions. This scandalous 18th-century kabbalistic text offers perhaps the most radical theology in the history of Jewish mysticism—one that challenges conventional categories of orthodoxy and heresy in ways that illuminate the limitations of both confessional and therapeutic appropriation.

Recent scholarship on Eybeschutz, particularly the work of David Halperin, Elliot Wolfson, and Pawel Maciejko, has established that *Va-avo ha-Yom el ha-Ayin* represents a fundamental departure from traditional Jewish theology through its doctrine of divine duality between "Mindful Light" and "Mindless Light" (88, 89, 90). The text's theological innovations include an erotic theogony featuring "multiplicity of divine beings" that "couple with one another, in pairings that are usually heterosexual, sometimes gay

or lesbian,” challenging conventional monotheistic categories (88).

Bloomer's engagement with Eybeschutz reveals the fundamental limitations of his confessional approach. While he recognizes the radical nature of Eybeschutz's theology of divine unconsciousness, Bloomer ultimately subordinates these insights to his Hebrew Catholic framework. His reading of the “Mindless Light” as somehow prefiguring Catholic teachings on divine hiddenness represents precisely the kind of apologetic reduction that prevents genuine encounter with mystical alterity.

Our approach to Eybeschutz allows for his radical insights to challenge conventional theological categories without requiring their domestication through predetermined religious frameworks. Our analysis of *tzimtzum* as involving “divine unconsciousness” directly engages with Eybeschutz's notion of “Mindless Light” in ways that generate new theological possibilities rather than simply confirming existing beliefs (99).

The Eybeschutz case illuminates broader questions about the relationship between theological innovation and religious tradition that affect all contemporary attempts to appropriate mystical sources. Eybeschutz's theology represents the kind of radical theological experimentation that becomes possible when mystical practitioners are willing to follow their insights to their logical conclusions regardless of their implications for orthodox religious categories.

19. Methodological Synthesis

The comparative analysis of Bloomer's confessional synthesis, contemporary academic approaches, appropriation suggests possibilities for developing more sophisticated methodological approaches to contemporary engagement with mystical traditions. The challenge lies in creating approaches that can maintain the scholarly rigor demanded by academic standards while enabling the kind of transformative engagement that both Bloomer and we seek through different means.

Contemporary developments in hermeneutical theory, particularly the work of scholars like Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer on the relationship between understanding and application, provide theoretical foundations for such methodological synthesis (91, 92). These approaches emphasize that authentic interpretation involves a “fusion of horizons” between past and present that transforms both the interpreter and the text through the interpretive process.

The concept of “critical participation” developed by scholars like Thomas Merton and Raimon Panikkar in their interfaith theological work suggests concrete possibilities for engaging mystical traditions in ways that maintain both critical distance and existential authenticity (93, 94). Critical participation involves what might be termed “engaged scholarship” that maintains rigorous analytical standards while allowing for personal transformation through encounter with religious otherness.

The therapeutic approach demonstrates one promising direction for such critical participation by showing how mystical insights can inform contemporary practice without requiring their subordination to traditional religious authorities. However, this approach requires greater grounding in historical and philological scholarship to achieve its full potential and avoid the instrumentalization that threatens any practical appropriation of religious traditions.

The future development of post-traditional mystical theology requires methodological approaches that can integrate the historical sophistication of contemporary academic scholarship with the existential engagement that authentic mystical practice requires. This involves developing forms of scholarship that are neither detached academic analysis nor uncritical confessional commitment but rather critical participation that allows mystical sources to transform contemporary understanding while maintaining awareness of the cultural and historical contexts that shaped these traditions.

20. Conclusion

Brother Gilbert Bloomer's complete theological corpus represents an ambitious attempt in to synthesize Jewish mystical traditions with Catholic sacramental theology. His remarkable erudition in tracing historical connections between diverse mystical streams, his methodological innovations in converso hermeneutics, and his systematic development of Hebrew Catholic spirituality demonstrate genuine theological creativity and scholarly sophistication that surpass most contemporary work in breadth of source material and synthetic ambition.

The discoveries embedded in Bloomer's work—particularly his analysis of converso mystical influence, his hypothesis about Frankist contributions to Catholic mysticism, and his identification of hidden Jewish dimensions in Catholic mystical texts—open genuinely new avenues for understanding how Jewish

and Christian mystical traditions have influenced each other in ways that challenge conventional religious boundaries.

However, the confessional constraints that shape Bloomer's interpretive framework ultimately prevent his work from realizing its full potential. His consistent subordination of Jewish sources to Catholic theological categories, his instrumentalization of mystical traditions for apologetic purposes, and his reproduction of supersessionist patterns despite sophisticated rhetorical innovations reveal the fundamental limitations of confessional approaches to interfaith theological engagement.

When evaluated against the methodological standards established by contemporary academic scholarship in Jewish mysticism—particularly the phenomenological sophistication of Elliot Wolfson, the literary sensitivity of the Fishbanes, the critical postmodernism of Shaul Magid, and the historical rigor of Moshe Idel—Bloomer's work reveals significant limitations in philological precision, phenomenological analysis, and critical methodology. His tendency toward broad thematic synthesis without detailed textual analysis, his apologetic use of historical connections, and his failure to engage seriously with the radical implications of mystical traditions reflect methodological approaches that contemporary scholarship has largely transcended.

Our therapeutic appropriation of kabbalistic sources, while avoiding many of the confessional constraints that limit Bloomer's project, faces its own methodological challenges in balancing practical application with scholarly rigor. However, our willingness to engage with the genuinely transgressive dimensions of mystical tradition—exemplified in his treatment of figures like Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz—demonstrates the kind of theological audacity required for authentic engagement with mystical alterity. The analysis of *tzimtzum* as involving "divine unconsciousness" and the exploration of therapeutic space as locus of divine concealment show how ancient mystical insights can generate contemporary therapeutic possibilities without requiring their subordination to predetermined theological or psychological systems (97, 98, 99).

The comparative analysis reveals that the future of mystical theology lies neither in confessional synthesis nor in therapeutic appropriation but in forms of critical participation that allow mystical sources to transform rather than merely confirm contemporary assumptions. This requires methodological approaches

that can maintain the scholarly precision of academic research while enabling the existential engagement that authentic mystical practice demands.

Contemporary developments in hermeneutical theory, postcolonial criticism, and interfaith studies provide theoretical resources for developing such approaches, but their practical implementation requires scholars and practitioners willing to risk having their fundamental assumptions challenged through encounter with mystical alterity. The test case of figures like Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz—whose radical theology challenges conventional religious categories—provides crucial standards for evaluating whether contemporary approaches possess the intellectual courage necessary for authentic mystical engagement.

The ultimate challenge facing contemporary engagement with mystical traditions lies in developing forms of theological reflection that can honor both the historical specificity and the transformative potential of these sources without reducing them to either confessional apologetics or therapeutic instruments. This requires what might be termed "post-traditional mystical theology" that transcends the boundaries of conventional religious systems while maintaining connection to the wisdom embedded in particular mystical traditions.

Such an approach would need to integrate the historical sophistication of contemporary academic scholarship with the existential engagement. The goal would be neither the defense of particular religious truth claims nor the development of practical therapeutic techniques but the cultivation of forms of theological reflection capable of generating genuinely new insights through creative encounter between ancient wisdom and contemporary experience.

The promise of mystical theology lies in its capacity to open possibilities for spiritual development and theological understanding that transcend the limitations of both traditional religious authorities and contemporary secular categories.

Realizing this promise requires methodological sophistication that contemporary scholarship has made possible, combined with the intellectual courage to allow mystical sources to challenge rather than confirm existing spiritual and theological assumptions. Brother Gilbert Bloomer's work, despite its limitations, points toward this possibility while illustrating the constraints that prevent its full realization. The future

development of mystical theology depends upon moving beyond these constraints toward forms of critical engagement that honor both the otherness and the wisdom of mystical traditions.

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