

## *Reason in Mysticism*

### Three Beguines, Three Views

WINFRIED CORDUAN

Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

The philosophical discussion of mysticism has allowed itself to be put into a corner. Ever since the turn into the twentieth century, mysticism has become pretty much equated with a theosophical model of reality, viz. the pantheistic identity between the human soul and the Absolute. Furthermore, the realization of this identity is supposed to occur in connection with a unitary experience in which the human subject finds herself totally at one with the Absolute, an experience that goes beyond all reason. This scheme has become so deeply ingrained in the philosophical and popular literature that it has been referred to as the *philosophia perennis*.<sup>1</sup>

What makes the idea of this *philosophia perennis* so poignant is that it should have been clear from the outset that the only way that it could be maintained was at the expense of ignoring a large share of the history of mysticism. Mysticism is a far more varied phenomenon than the procrustean bed of the *philosophia perennis* actually allows. In response some writers have simply declared that those forms of mysticism that fit the theosophical model are genuine and that all others are of lesser authenticity.<sup>2</sup> Surely this is not an appropriate way to carry on philosophical analysis.

So, for example, must mysticism be irrational? Some of the descriptions of mysticism that are widely regarded as "classic" have posited an inextricable link between mystical experience and a break-down in reason. Thus, in William James' analysis of mysticism, *ineffability* and *noetic quality* are the first two — and only essential — characteristics of mystical experience, and James leaves the inference that true mystical experience simultaneously conveys information and removes this supposed information from

<sup>1</sup> Most notably Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (Cleveland, OH: World, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1960), 46. See my further discussion on this issue in *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 41-61.

access by the rational mind.<sup>3</sup> W. T. Stace submits a general diagnosis of a breakdown in logic for all authentic mysticism: Furthermore, more popular opinions seem to equate mysticism and irrationalism.<sup>4</sup>

However, a look at various mystics in the history of Christianity displays a wide range of perceptions on reason. It turns out that this area of diversity is actually just one more point of distinction among all those thinkers whom we sometimes label as "mystics." There are different stories of Christian mysticism, and so we can expect different roles which reason may play within these stories, sometimes as protagonist, sometimes as antagonist, and sometimes as supporting character.

In this essay we will look at three such examples of the role of reason in Christian mysticism. Our representatives will be three thirteenth-century Beguines, viz. members of the informal communal associations which provided opportunity for ministry and piety, particularly in the low countries and Rhineland: Hadewijch of Brabant, Margaret Porete, and Mechthild of Magdeburg.<sup>5</sup> All three women have this much in common: They advocate a piety in which love is the highest goal. However, the relationship between love and reason is markedly different in each case. We will look at the role of reason in each of them in turn, concluding with a brief observation concerning the place of reason in Christian mysticism.

### *Hadewijch: Reason as Queen<sup>7</sup>*

Hadewijch of Brabant (also called "of Antwerp") lived in the thirteenth century; beyond that information we are uncertain of her dates. She was a Beguine and apparently for many years the mistress of her community. Late in life she was expelled for reasons which are also not spelled out for us, but it appears that her trouble was not so much from the persecution of the Beguines by the Church hierarchy as from an internal revolt by her sisters who had become impatient with her extremes. We have no reliable knowledge of how Hadewijch's life ended.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier, 1961), 299-300.

<sup>4</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 270.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Carl F. H. Henry wrote: "Religious mysticism depicts intuition as a way of knowing that contrasts with both reason and sensation, and therefore also with intelligible divine revelation." *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), 1:70.

<sup>6</sup> These three women have been brought together for analysis at least once before. Kurt Ruh, "Beginenmystik: Hadewijch, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete" *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 106 (1977): 265-77. This article is a brief treatment of their thought and style in general which does not focus on any one issue.

<sup>7</sup> Hadewijch's writings have been edited by Josef Van Mierlo as *Hadewijch: Visioenen* (Louvain, 1924-25); *Hadewijch: Strophische Gedichten* (Antwerp: Standaard, 1942);

Hadewijch is credited with inventing a new literary form, namely transforming medieval poetry of courtly love into Christian mystical love poetry. Thus the ideal of romantic love becomes the Christian ideal of divine love. Unfortunately the way to attainment of true love is difficult, and Hadewijch leaves us in no doubt as to how hard she finds it. Thus she has been called "the sublime poetess of complaints."<sup>8</sup> Let us summarize Hadewijch's ideas with an eye towards the role of reason in her approach.

1. *God is love and love is God.* "God is love," say the scriptures (I John 4:16), and for Hadewijch this idea embodies the highest truth. Three of her letters begin with this simple identification: "Oh, I greet you, dear, with the love that is God himself!" (L 7:1), "God be your love, dear heart!" (L 21:1), "May God be God for you in truth, in which he is God and Love at once!" (L 23:1). Throughout her writings, the two are continually equated and interchanged. For example, Hadewijch states that God is "comprised in the fruition of Love" (L 22:375). Thus you must "devote yourself to God in the works that content Love" (L 23:7). More specifically, Love can be Christ himself (PC 16:33-34), but more often Love appears to be the Godhead behind the persons of the trinity. The Godhead is unity and fruition (L 28:81-85), and this unity is also "unity of purest love" and it is where "Love belongs to Love and is perfect fruition of herself" (L 17:56, 67-69).

2. *Union with God is a union of love.* Hadewijch's goal is union with God through love. Love is more than an attitude or virtue; it is, as we have seen, God's own nature. Thus the only kind of love with which we must love him is "that great love wherewith he loves himself" (L 16:10-12). Then God and the human merge and "that bond of glue is Love, whereby God and the blessed soul are in oneness" (L 16:30-32). The results of this "exclusive union with Love" (L 13:14) are staggering: "When by fruition man is united to Love, he becomes God, mighty and just" (L 17:98-99).

3. *Reason paves the way for love.* This wonderful state of love is not attained easily. The first step is a life based on reason. Hadewijch teaches that "enlightened reason casts light on all the ways of service which are welcome to the will of sublime Love and show clearly all the things that content Love" (L 12:115-17). Reason opens the eyes to love (PS 26:73).

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*Hadewijch: Brieven* (Antwerp: Standaard, 1947); *Hadewijch: Mengedichten* (Antwerp: Standaard, 1952). A complete English translation is given in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist, 1980). Hadewijch wrote in four genres: Letters (L), Poems in Stanzas (PS), Visions (V), and Poems in Couplets (PC). Immediate references to her writings will be cited by having the following notation in parentheses: genre, piece number, and the line numbers (which are identical in Van Mierlo and Hart). For example, (PC 9:59-62) refers to Poems in Couplets 9, lines 59 to 62. The English translations are from Hart.

M. Brauns, "Hadewych en haar school" *Streven* N. R. 6 (1952): 11, cited in Hart, "Introduction," *Complete Works*, 38. The effect is only enhanced, not lessened, when Hadewijch (almost comically) insists that "I have not complained much, and I do not wish you to grow discouraged or complain." (L 21:4)

Reason is the gift of God. Consequently, "if man would follow reason, he would never be deceived" (L 14:61). Hadewijch refers to reason as the "rule of life" (L 18:62). It is the method we follow in obedience to God as we imitate the humanity of Christ. To abandon reason means to lose love. For example, to trust your feelings rather than your reason means that "we upset the game before we win it" (pC 3:102). For,

when reason is obscured, the will grows weak and powerless and feels an aversion to effort, because reason does not enlighten it (L 4:8-9).

4. *Reason has a cognitive function.* A primary function of reason for Hadewijch is the processing of information. Reason provides insight into how to find love (PS 30:40). It confronts us with truth by shining its light (L 18:130). Still, the work of reason is always more than informational; items of content knowledge by themselves are useless.

He who strives after particular points of knowledge  
Lacks something important in veritable Love (PC 10:1-2).

Thus we need to be instructed, not merely by human reason, but by "the reason of the great God" (V 1:76). As we shall see below, that reason is Christ.

5. *Reason has a practical junction.* The dominant understanding of reason for Hadewijch is as a guide for action. At one point she explains, "What I mean by 'your reason' is that you must keep your insight ever vigilant in the use of discernment" (L 24:5-7). Reason presents the way in which full love and holiness are attained.

Man must so keep himself pure from sin among all vicissitudes that he will seek his growth in all things and work, according to the manner prescribed by reason, above all things (L 13:45).

In the process, one must become subject to reason (L 13:18). To do so is fruitful. "By reason's counsel, work is noble" (PS 43:78). Thus reason not only discloses truth cognitively, but it also is the practical means of active virtue.

6. *Errors in reason are errors in virtue.* Human reason is not infallible. There are several ways in which reason can err - though it is not so much reason itself as illegitimate human reliance on reason that can be misleading. First, there is the possibility of the human will not being congruent with reason. Let us say that reason identifies something as good. But someone might not have sufficient understanding or might not put the understanding into practice. Hadewijch construes this scenario as a failure of will with far-reaching consequences.

When reason is obscured, the will grows weak and powerless....  
Consequently the memory loses its deep notions, and the joyous confidence, and the repeated zealous intentions (L 4:8-12).

A second cause of error arises when a person believes that she has direct comprehension of God. Hadewijch does not permit human intellect ever to have understanding of that magnitude. "All that man comes to in his thought of God, and all that he can understand of him or imagine under any outward form, is not God" (L 12:31-33). To confuse divine reality with pictures of divine reality is always going to cause errors which are then going to manifest themselves in misdirected forms of piety.

7. *Reason has limits.* It is clear from the foregoing that reason, though necessary, is far from omniscient. Reason leads to love, but the fruition of love lies beyond reason.

If anyone did not fear hell ...

And desired above measure,

And above reason, and above thought,

That were great profit in love (PC 10:15,20-22; emphasis mine).

Hadewijch reports concerning one of her visions, "And he took me out of the spirit in that highest fruition of wonder beyond reason; then I had fruition of him as I shall eternally" (V 5:63-64). Thus reason is a lot like a ladder which must be climbed and then left behind in order to attain an objective.

For reason cannot understand

How love, by Love, sees to the depths of the Beloved (L 19:19-20).

8. *Reason blocks the attainment of love.* This statement sounds contradictory to earlier ones, of course. But it is a paradox which can be resolved with the idea that an important way in which reason carries out its task is negative. Hadewijch complains,

To wait for the fruition of Love;

Cruel reason

Which helps against it;

Introduces confusion in my mental powers (PS 16:27-30).

Thus there comes a point in experience when reason no longer suffices to attain love. But — and this is the crucial matter — at the same time reason shows that one is not yet worthy of love. Here we have the heart of Hadewijch's predicament and the cause of many of her complaints: The goal has not been attained, and the only available means of attainment also makes it clear that it is not capable of bringing about attainment.

Then Reason did me an injury.

I thought it a feud,

That she took from me the attire

Love herself had given me (PS 30:61-64).

It seems as though one is up against the impossible. Of course, Hadewijch knows that there is hope. If she continues to abide by the teachings of reason, then eventually she may yet find the fulfillment of love.

It is truly no easy risk  
 To ask Reason's counsel about Love.  
 Yet on this it depends to receive  
 Love in her entirety all thus to win (PS 30:49-52).

9. *Reason is Christ.* Reason mediates our way to the Godhead; thus we can see how for Hadewijch reason bears the role of Christ. Additionally, there is a longstanding tradition which identifies the second person of the trinity with rational faculties. In the Gospel of John and Justin Martyr, he is the *logos*; for Augustine, the Son corresponds to understanding; Hadewijch, apparently relying on William of St. Thierry,<sup>9</sup> uses the term, "reason." The human faculties of memory, reason, and will correspond to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively. The first of these two mediate each other.

He gave us his Nature in the soul, with three powers whereby to love his Three Persons: with enlightened reason, the Father; with the memory, the wise Son of God; and with the high flaming will, the Holy Spirit (L 22: 137-40).

If, at first glance, this quotation looks backwards from the analysis just given, it is because each of the persons uses the other as instrument. Reason (corresponding to the Son) directs us to the Father, while the memory (corresponding to the Father) directs us to the Son. When we live according to reason we emulate Christ, particularly in his humanity, (L 2:324-43).

10. *Conclusion: Reason is Queen.* Hadewijch refers to love as Queen twice (PS 2:12; V 13:18), and this fact comes as no surprise given her commitment to the ultimacy of love. However, reason is also Queen. Because of the crucial role which reason plays in her theology, as we have seen, this fact should also not be startling. In one of Hadewijch's visions, Queen Reason comes, attended by three maidens: Holy Fear, Discernment, and Wisdom (V 9:41). After acknowledging Reason, the following event transpired: "Then Reason became subject to me, and I left her. But Love came and embraced me" (V 9:68-69).

Let us summarize the road to this happy ending. Love, except in a superficial or sentimental sense, cannot be found easily. It takes a life committed to reason. A proper way of life is based on reason; but there are hazards along the way. We may make errors of reason, and reason cannot finish the task of bringing us to love - though it does quite well in showing us how far we have to go. Nevertheless, if we persevere, love itself may reach out to us. Were we simply to abandon reason, we could never attain that goal. But if we will stick with reason despite all apparent hopelessness, then we may attain love. Thus in Hadewijch's mysticism, reason performs a limited, but crucial role. Reason, equated with Christ, is Queen indeed.

<sup>9</sup> Hart, "Introduction," *Complete Works*, 8.

## Margaret Porete: *The Death of Reason*<sup>10</sup>

Margaret Porete's ideas appear so antithetical to Hadewijch's that one could almost think that Margaret is undertaking a point by point refutation of Hadewijch's writings. Although in the final analysis it is moot whether Margaret ever read Hadewijch's works, time and space factors do not rule out that Margaret may have been aware of Hadewijch's approach to spirituality, or at least of a line of thought very similar to Hadewijch's.

What we know of Margaret Porete comes from two sources; medieval inquisition records which document her martyrdom (Paris, 1310) and her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, the continued publication of which caused her so much trouble. Again the biographical information is scarce. By the time we meet Margaret she is a Beguine, but she is not attached to any particular house; instead she is carrying out an itinerant teaching ministry. In the process, she is distributing her book, *The Mirror*, to those who she feels can understand it, having received prior clearance from three theologians that it is free of error. But, Guy II, Bishop of Cambrais, nevertheless condemns it, burns the book, and orders Margaret to desist from further distribution of it. When Margaret refuses to comply, she is incarcerated for several months and eventually she is burned as a lapsed heretic.

Of interest for our purposes is not Margaret's orthodoxy *per se*, but the place of reason in her thought, so a quick summary must suffice. <sup>11</sup> At the heart of Margaret's doctrines is the notion of the sublation of the soul into God. As the human soul extinguishes herself, she loses herself completely

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Porete [note numerous spelling variations, e.g. Marguerite Porete], *Le Mirouer des simples ames*, ed. Romana Guarnieri. *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pietà* 4 (1965): 351-708, is an edition of a manuscript copy of the French original. It is published alongside a medieval Latin version, ed. by Paul Verdeyen in *Corpus Christianorum; Continuation Mediaevalis*, 69 (Turnhout: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1986). There are several Middle English versions, edited in: *The Mirror of Simple Soules: A Middle English Translation*, ed. Marilyn Doiron. *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pietà* 5 (1968): 243-356. Possibly more easily accessible is the dissertation on which this published edition is based: M. Marilyn Doiron, *The Mirroure of Simple Soules: An Edition and Commentary*, Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1964. This edition also contains invaluable historical sources in the Appendix A, 214-18. Translations into modern English are by Clare Kirchenberger, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (London: Orchard Books, 1927) and by Charles Crawford, *A Mirror for Simple Souls* (New York: Crossroad, 1981 and 1990). The 1990 version was revised to include acknowledgment of Margaret's authorship. My references to the *Mirror* will be to the section and line numbers of the Guarnieri edition, followed by the page numbers of the 1990 Crawford translations (from which also most direct quotations are taken). E.g. (6:3-5/30) refers to section 6, lines 3-5 of the *Miroeuer* and page 30 of Crawford.

<sup>11</sup> In "The Gospel According to Margaret" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992): 515-30, I argue that Margaret was susceptible to the charge of heresy by the standards of her day, but that these points may possibly make her a precursor to the Protestant Reformation.

into God who takes over control of her life. This experience is the fifth of seven stages through which the soul must pass. (118/127-33) Altogether they are:

- (1) The soul is touched by God's grace, set apart from sin, and is intent to keep the commandments.
- (2) The soul determines to love God and please him through perfection.
- (3) The soul also sacrifices her will to the Beloved.
- (4) The soul is in a state of loving meditation.
- (5) The soul realizes that God is all and sublates herself into him. "So the soul has fallen from the state of love to that of nothingness." (118:159/132)
- (6) The soul is entirely absorbed into God. "Nothing exists save God alone, the source of all being." (118: 179-80/132)<sup>12</sup>
- (7) The last stage is reserved by God for heaven. We do not yet know what it will be.

What is radical about Margaret's scheme is the apparent antinomianism and quietism. She says (in the person of Love),

Once the soul has reached this state, she can say to the virtues: 'I have no further need of you, now I have served you all this time.' (6:3-5/30)

and,

She seeks neither disgrace nor poverty, worries, nor cares; she needs no masses or sermons, she gives nature all she asks willingly and ungrudgingly. (9: 18-22/35)

Her doctrine is developed in *The Mirror* which is essentially a running dialogue between "Love"<sup>13</sup> and "Reason" with frequent contributions from the "Soul" and occasional commentary by other characters. As we look at the role of reason in this arrangement, the following picture emerges.

1. *The content of Christian doctrine is based Onfaith, not reason.* It is important at the outset of our investigation to realize that for Margaret reason does not represent an independent source of belief content.. This function is carried out by faith, which consequently has a clearly cognitive function itself.. As such, there are limits set to faith; faith cannot penetrate to the depth of love (15:19-29/49,19:10/53). Thus, rather than having a traditional arrangement of faith taking over once reason has reached its limits, we see

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<sup>12</sup> Although this terse statement by itself sounds like pantheism (and no doubt contributed to Margaret's' condemnation), this is not actually the case. This stage reports on the experience of the union involved, which is entirely due to an act of grace by God, not to a natural identity.

<sup>13</sup> Because it is at times helpful to distinguish between the characters of the dialogue and the faculties they represent, I am capitalizing the former, but not the latter. I am also maintaining the gender designations from Crawford's edition, feminine for Love and Soul, masculine for Reason.

love taking over once faith has reached its limits. Reason supports faith, and, as we shall see, also encounters the same limits.

2. *Reason supplies logic and understanding.* "Prove it!" Reason challenges Love.(32: 13/68) Several times reason accuses love of committing a contradiction. (20: 19-20/55, 21 :3-8/57, 23 :22-28/59-60) And throughout the dialogue reason strives after clarity. "For God's sake, Love, what can you mean?"' is Reason's first speech when he makes his first appearance.(7:6-7/32) The request becomes more concrete; he asks Love to clear up the first apparent contradiction, "How can [the soul] will everything and nothing?"(7:7-19/32)

3. *Reason represents a life of virtue.* The understanding of reason as the faculty of virtue is a point shared by Hadewijch and Margaret Porete, only Margaret casts it into a negative light while Hadewijch sees it as a boon. For both of them the life based on reason is a life based on the virtues. Early in the discussion Reason sets the agenda, "Surely without [the virtues] no one can be saved, or reach perfection, or be saved from deception?"(8:7-9/33) Reason refers to himself as "activist."(10:24/37) He allies himself with "ordinary people" who lead a life of virtue (13:7/45), and he attempts to speak for "contemplatives."(11:4-5/38) Life along the stages to salvation begins with reason. Love herself admits, "If I require it of them, they must follow the inner promptings of their lives in their quest for perfection through reason."(89:25/122) The "lesser church," those who still live by their own good works, "still follow the dictates of Reason."(43:13-19/179, 19:11-12/53) Reason summarizes his mission,

I teach people to seek disgrace and poverty and other mortifications, to go to mass, listen to sermons, fast and say their prayers, to be on their guard against nature, particularly when it tempts to love, because you never know where that will lead. I tell them to long above all things for heaven, and to be afraid of going to hell, to refuse worldly honours and all the good things of life except what they absolutely need to survive, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ and his sufferings. (13:33-43/46)

As a sidelight we can point here to another parallel to Hadewijch: the life of reason focuses on the imitation of the humanity of Christ..

4. *There are cognitive limits to reason.* Reason is not able to follow Love's teaching. The Soul reprimands Reason: "Your understanding is very superficial.. You just take the chaff and leave the kernel of truth."(12:28-30/44) Later on, the Soul is still being offensive toward Reason: "It's true what they say: you have ears and do not hear! ... If you and your insect-brained followers can't follow, this is because only those who are schooled in true love can understand what this book is teaching." (53:8-15/88)

The truths of love simply go beyond human cognition. Love declares:

What I am trying to say is that even if this soul had all the knowledge, all the love and understanding that has ever existed or will exist, this is nothing compared to what she loves and will love. (11:107-111/42)

All the learning in the world is irrelevant.. (11:73-77/41) True understanding is beyond reason. Sublated souls "do not seek to understand fully, but God puts full understanding in them." (95: 19-20/126) But that sort of understanding is, once again, only possible for love. (12:32-35/44)

5. *There are spiritual limits to reason.* Most importantly, the life of reason — and the life of virtue it represents — is inadequate for spiritual fulfillment.. The Soul once again minces no words when she declaims, "Oh, you small-minded, coarse people who follow the asinine course of reason! I am not going to descend to your petty level." (68:12-16/102) Reason would like an explanation for this denunciation and receives one: "I think they are confined in the temple of the low, and labour by the sweat of their brow to earn their bread." (69:5-7/102) People who have not yet relinquished their will are slaves. "Their slavery comes from doing all they do out of reason and fear." (48:24-29/84) Such slavery can ultimately only misdirect the soul.

If I call you donkey it is because you look for God in creatures and in nature ... People who look for God in hills and woods and valleys see him as bound by his sacraments and works and are silent and miserable for not finding him. (69:35-43/105-106)

Consequently the only true road to freedom is through the soul's repudiation of reason. Love explains,

Her greatest joy is to have freed herself from the domain of reason and the other virtues, so bound up in being chosen by God that her discourse begins where theirs leaves off. (66:10-15/101)

And so the following lengthy quotation, conflated in Crawford's translation, sums up the entire story:

At first [the soul] strove with might and main to do everything her mistress, reason, told her; and reason always told her to do everything the virtues required, without argument, to the death if need be. So reason and the virtues were the soul's mistresses, and the soul obeyed them in all things. But then the soul learned so much from the virtues that she rose above them. (21:23-35/58)

The soul then acquires the mistress of the virtues: divine love. The abandonment of reason and of the life of virtue is the condition for receiving God's love.

6. *Conclusion: Reason Must Die!* It is impossible to do without reason completely. In fact, it would be wrong to label Margaret Porete's views as irrational despite the foregoing statements. Whenever Reason challenges

Love to clarify a point or an apparent contradiction, Love does so patiently and intelligibly. Love uses logic throughout and would not tolerate genuine contradictions any more than Reason would. But Love knows that there are limits beyond which Reason simply cannot penetrate.

Thus the Soul on her way to sublation must overcome Reason. Reason cannot maintain control over her; she must become Reason's master, and Reason her servant. (36:3-7/73, 38:27-39:6/75) But at the ultimate moment Reason has no role left to play. The climax of the *Mirror* occurs when Reason is too exhausted from trying to understand the Soul's paradoxes and dies. And the Soul comments, "He should have died before. Now I can come freely into my own. The word of love is the death of reason." (87:14-18/121)

We can now summarize Margaret's view of reason. Reason plays an important role in an innocuous, cognitive, sense. But reason's more significant role is as directing an active life of virtue, the same role it plays for Hadewijch. Whereas in Hadewijch there was simply a limit to reason, in Margaret reason's entire role is cast in a negative light. True love is attained, not through following reason up to the limit, but through vanquishing reason. Reason represents a form of works-salvation which Margaret Porete rejects; only in total abandonment can the soul become sublated in God.

### *Mechthild of Magdeburg: Balancing the Faculties of Reason*

Mechthild of Magdeburg tells us enough about herself in her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*,<sup>14</sup> that we can piece together the basic outline of her life. She was born in the vicinity of Magdeburg in 1210 and had her first rapturous experience when she was twelve years old. From this time on she never felt apart from the presence of God. At age 23 she left her comfortable surroundings and joined a Beguine community. During most of her tenure there her community was officially directed by the Dominicans. Around the time that she turned 40, after years of physical deprivation and spiritual attainment, Mechthild began to write down her visionary insights, a process which lasted approximately 15 years and which led to the first six

<sup>14</sup> Mechthild's book was collected by her spiritual director, Heinrich von Halle, and translated into Middle High German by Heinrich von Nordlingen. One manuscript of this version is housed at the Benedictine Monastery of Einsiedeln. It is published as Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. Hans Neumann (Munich and Zurich: Artemis, 1990). There are two German translations: Gall P. Morel, *Offenbarungen oder Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, Regensburg, 1869; M. Schmidt, *Mechthild von Magdeburg: Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1955). An English translation was undertaken by Lucie Menzies, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg or The Flowing*

parts of her book. Mechthild finished her life in the Cistercian monastery at Helfta. Since she was blind by this time, she dictated the last part of her book, possibly to her long-time friend and spiritual director, Heinrich von Halle.

It is very difficult to find any systematic theological strands in Mechthild. Her writing consists of a blending of images, visions, and teachings devoid of any apparent order. In contrast to Hadewijch and Margaret, Mechthild represents far more of a popular stereotypical picture of medieval imagery, complete with lurid descriptions of hell, purgatory, and Satan (1, 5: 1-15/9; 2, 3/38; 3, 17/83; 3, 21/84; etc.).

But Mechthild goes her own way on certain fundamental points. One is her incessant criticism of the church and the priesthood (e.g. 6, 21/188-89). Even the pope is not exempt. It is not surprising that she received hostile reactions.

The other point of individuality lies in Mechthild's love mysticism. On the one hand she does uphold the teaching of the church concerning the need for a life of good works in the long, arduous pursuit of salvation. But there is another way possible — the way of mystical love. God desires fellowship with the human soul (4, 12:33-34/105), and the soul cannot attain to this communion. "Of good works alas! I have none" (1, 37:4/18). So the alternative is to turn directly to God. "If we would be like Him we must live like Him — or else be saved through repentance" (5, 16:14-16/137). As the soul turns to God in repentance, he grants her his love and righteousness (6, 1:15-103/168). Foreshadowing Luther's *simul Justus et peccator*, Mechthild states, "It is a fathomless mystery that God looks on sinners as converted men" (6, 17:3/186).<sup>15</sup>

In another distinction to Hadewijch and Margaret, Mechthild does not actually discuss "reason," (*vernunftleikheit*), as a distinct category. The term arises only incidentally; once it is the name of one of the seven crowns worn by Sister Hildegard in heaven (2, 20:20/45); another time it is the name of the light prepared for the bride of Christ, mentioned without any further explanation (1, 46:22/*not* included by Menzies). Other than that, we need to piece together Mechthild's view of reason by looking at her treatment of the faculties which are usually classified within the domain of reason: the senses, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. As we look at these faculties, a very balanced picture emerges.

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*Light the Godhead* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1953). My references to Mechthild will be by indicating the part of the book, the chapter number, the line numbers in the Neumann edition, and the page number in the Menzies translation. E.g. (3, 22:5-7/71) refers part 3, chapter 22, lines 5-7 in Neumann, page 71 in Menzies. The English translations will be from Menzies.

<sup>15</sup> For more on Mechthild's picture of salvation see James C. Franklin, *Mystical Transformations: The Imagery of Liquids in the Work of Mechthild von Magdeburg* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978).

1. *The senses represent the lower orders of human reason and religion.* The senses (*sinne*) refer not only to the empirical-sensory, but also to the kind of knowledge which is based on superficial experience.<sup>16</sup> As such the senses can never penetrate beyond the earthly to the realm of heavenly truth. "What can be seen with human eyes, heard by human ears and spoken by the human tongue, is as different from the Truth revealed to the loving soul as a wax candle to the full sun" (6, 36:5-7/199). Complicating this picture is the constant possibility that the senses may be deceived either by devils or other creatures (6, 23:3-5/190). It is true that the senses are integral to a form of religion. In a short dialogue between the senses and the soul, they direct the soul to God through the tears of Mary Magdalene, chastity, the blood of martyrs, the counsel of confessors, the wisdom of Apostles, angels, holy austerity, and the Virgin's mother-love (1, 44:44-62/22-23). But the soul rejects all of these ways as superficial and insists on going directly to God (her "lover's side"). Thereupon the senses beg off:

Ah! Lady! Comest thou there  
Then we are blinded,  
So fiery is the glory of the Godhead" (1, 44:64-65/24).

Of the four faculties mentioned, the senses are the least potent..

2. *Knowledge as true awareness is essential.* The term *bekantnisse*, which is the MHG word for "knowledge," does extensive duty for Mechthild. It can refer to "awareness," "recognition," and "understanding"; Menzies translates it as "knowledge" or "understanding," depending on the context. Because of the possible conceptual difference between these two concepts (at least in English), we shall follow Menzies in treating knowledge as content awareness and as understanding separately.

Love may blind the senses, but for Mechthild love is not based on ignorance. "Stupidity is sufficient to itself alone," remarks Mechthild (4, 4:7/101). A rough definition of *bekantnisse* in this usage by Mechthild is *the awareness of reality*. At its simplest, knowledge accumulates facts, and for Mechthild certain facts are indispensable. In order to find the love of God, we must be aware of our sin (6, 1:119-25/167; 3, 6:3/73), who God is (2, 7:6-9/37), and how God leads us through suffering (6, 14:3-13/178). Love cannot be an empty feeling.

Love without knowledge  
Is darkness to the wise soul (1, 21:2/12).

3. *The natural limits of knowledge are augmented by wisdom, God, and love.* As a human faculty, knowledge is limited (6, 41:3-5/202); this fact is not surprising. But what may be surprising is that Mechthild does not depict this limit as an impenetrable barrier. Knowledge can be increased, if not to

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the way in which the English word *sense* does double duty: *the sense of smell* and *common sense*.

an infinite level, then at least beyond its natural perimeter. Wisdom (*wisheit*), the practical dimension of reason which we will describe further below, improves knowledge (5, 24:45-49/150; 6, 1:142-43/168). Such wise knowledge can come only from God (6, 32:9-25/196); it is received through faith (6, 6:9-10/172). Most significantly for our study, knowledge does not leave off where love picks up. Love is not the end of knowledge, but it leads to higher knowledge. Mechthild pictures the soul as dancing with the Lord:

Then I will leap for love  
 From love to knowledge,  
 From knowledge to fruition (1, 44:33-34/21).

Thus for Mechthild knowledge is essential, and even though its insufficiency by itself never completely vanishes, it does not lose its place in the scheme of things either. As the soul makes progress in divine love, knowledge is augmented, not annihilated.

4. *Some understanding is essential.* Mechthild also uses *bekanntnisse* in a way that in English would correspond to "understanding," thus transcending mere content awareness. Understanding is the faculty of comprehension. When you understand something, it makes sense to you; you see its connections and implications. Mechthild believes that a certain amount of understanding is necessary for spiritual progress. In order to find "the unmingled joy of union," we must receive "discipline in understanding" (2, 3:9/30). When Mechthild discusses the severe shortcomings of the church, she includes the following diagnosis: "For she is half-blind in understanding and crippled in her hands which do no good works" (5, 34:31-32/160). By implication, greater understanding would have brought about a better church. The physical suffering endured in the quest for love is off-set by the reward of great understanding (1, I: 16/5); here Mechthild uses the related word, *bekanntheit*.

5. *The natural limits of understanding are augmented by love.* Understanding can comprehend much, but it cannot see everything. In another little dialogue, the soul refers to understanding as so wise that it should not have to ask questions (2, 19:19/42). But understanding does ask questions; in fact, it reaches a virtually impenetrable area in the intimacy between God and the soul. Understanding requests,

Ah! Bride! Couldst thou but give me a hint  
 Of the unspeakable intimacy  
 Between God and thyself?

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"This quotation goes on: "thirdly it abounds in desolation" (6, 20:12-13/188). Thus a fair presentation of what Mechthild is saying here must recognize that understanding disrupts the soul's equanimity in love.

But the soul refuses:

That I cannot do;  
No bride may tell what happens to her! (2,19:31-34/42-43).

Here and in many other places there is a natural limit set for understanding (1,2:10&18-19/6; 1,29:6-7/16; 7,17:1-37/219-21; etc.)

But again it turns out that this barrier is more flexible than it appears at first. Although human understanding is never perfect, an increase in love also brings about an increase in understanding. (1, 1:16/5) "But the nature of love is such that it overflows at first in sweetness, then it becomes rich in understanding" (6, 20: 11-12/188).<sup>17</sup> Despite its imperfection, understanding remains an essential aspect of the soul's relationship to God.

6. *The highest faculty is wisdom.* Because of its practical dimension, wisdom (*wisheit*) is at once a faculty and a virtue. As such it occupies the place of honor at the side of love.

Wisdom is ever beside Love  
And is mistress of all maidens.  
She guards what Love gives  
And makes what man teaches or reads  
Ofuse to him (7, 48:84-86/248).

Mechthild enumerates three types of wisdom. First there is Christian religious wisdom which manifests itself in the full life of the church (4, 3:12-20/99). Second is common, natural wisdom which is accessible even to "false priests and perverted spiritual people" (4,3:76-77/100). Third is the wisdom of grace. Of this wisdom Mechthild says, "It suffices for all the gifts of God" and "delights in God's will alone" (4, 3:86-87/101). She claims that wisdom is "clothed with delight and crowned by eternity" (1, 46:7/26) and counts it as one of the honors of the preaching orders that they "possess the holy wisdom of Divine Truth" (5, 24:70/151). Wisdom brings us closer to God than any other faculty of human reason.

7. *The natural limits of wisdom are overcome in Christ who is highest Wisdom.* Even wisdom is not omniscient; it is still transcended by love. "When I may delight in my Love, then wisdom can teach me nothing" (3, 3:8-9/69). Nevertheless, a still higher place is reserved for wisdom. As divine wisdom, it is identified with Christ himself. In two separate descriptions of the trinity, Mechthild refers to the Son as "like the Father in unspeakable Wisdom" (3, 9:9/74) and as "Wisdom-without-beginning" (4, 14:9/108). Thus to come to Christ in love is, in the final analysis, not to leave wisdom, but to advance to the highest wisdom.

8. *Conclusion: Reason grows through love.* When we look at the faculties of reason in Mechthild, a complex, but consistent, picture emerges. Senses (*sinne*), knowledge as awareness or understanding (*bekanntnisse*),

and wisdom (*wished*) are of increasing worth on the path to the love of God. There are limits to all four, but the last three are never totally abandoned. Instead they are elevated by divine love to higher levels.

If it is permissible to take one further step and generalize concerning all of reason in Mechthild, a very flexible picture emerges in contrast to our two other Beguines. For Hadewijch reason is the single road to love which eventually becomes a hindrance and must be transcended. For Margaret, reason represents the false road of works salvation and thus is the enemy to be vanquished. But for Mechthild reason plays an important supporting role. It leads us to love through knowledge and understanding. It puts love into practice through wisdom. And when reason has reached its limits, viz. when it has brought us as close to love as possible, then, in a grand reversal, reason is in turn nourished by love.

### *Conclusion: Reason and Mysticism*

Must mysticism be irrational? We have looked at three different approaches by three different women, but there is one thing that all three have in common: not one of them is irrational. If "irrational" is supposed to mean "contrary to logic and coherence" then that term does not apply to anyone of our three representative mystics. This conclusion may appear particularly startling with regard to Margaret Porete who celebrates the death of reason - but only as long as we forget the peculiar role reason plays in her thought.

Let us close out this investigation by summarizing four roles which we have observed reason to play.

1. *Reason as virtuous action.* In both Hadewijch and Margaret, reason has taken on a very distinctive meaning; it represents the way to God through works of virtue. Hadewijch endorses it; Margaret condemns it. But this understanding of reason is a very special one. It is theological and has little to do with the epistemological questions of logic and coherence.

2. *Reason as rationality.* Even Margaret Porete has attempted similarly to Hadewijch and Mechthild to maintain logical coherence. As mentioned above, at several points in the *Mirror*, Reason confronts Love with an apparent contradiction - which Love goes on to resolve. We see no flight into illogical thinking, but an attempt to think coherently.

3. *Reason as epistemology.* Not everything that is logically coherent can be deduced with a logical proof. All three of our Beguines make this point in their own way, but it is Margaret who makes it the strongest. Nevertheless, this truth applies not only to mystical theology; it is a given in all human experience. Not everything which can be known can be verified rationally (e.g. feelings, basic beliefs, memories). If this trait is what makes

mysticism irrational, then all human experience is irrational. But surely, that would be an exaggerated judgment.

4. *Reason as understanding.* One need not be a mystic to believe that there is a point at which human rational categories fall short of divine mystery. Sooner or later we can no longer comprehend God's nature; sooner or later language gives out. All three Beguines make this point, thereby merely lining themselves up with the rest of the world of Christian theology. It may be that Mechthild, for whom greater understanding based on love supersedes lesser understanding, has the most helpful description in this matter in that her assertions are more qualified and less extreme than those of either Hadewijch or Margaret.<sup>18</sup>

Thus we see that mysticism need not be synonymous with irrationality. It is unfortunate that the two terms have become linked so often. When we look at the actual writings of some outstanding Christian mystics, we see a balanced and thoughtful approach to reason.

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<sup>18</sup> We saw that Margaret at one point also makes such a statement (126). It is difficult, to see, however, how that notion fits into the rest of her thought, whereas the idea is developed much more clearly in Mechthild.