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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARGARET

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In 1310, before an emotional crowd in Paris, Margaret Porette was burned at the stake. She had been charged with and convicted of being a relapsed heretic. Specifically she had authored a book that, according to high ecclesiastical authorities, had been determined to be full of errors and false teaching. Even though the book was burned she disseminated it further. Her execution drew many spectators, possibly including Meister Eckhart, who had yet to reach the peak of his popularity. There is good reason to believe that the book in question was *The Mirror of Simple Souls.*[1]

The point of this article is to call attention to the contribution made by Margaret Porette. Of necessity this task involves primarily addressing the question of the orthodoxy of the *Mirror.* I am going to make the following case: Margaret's views were such that by the standards of the day it is not surprising that the inquisition would find her guilty. But beyond those strictures Margaret made a lasting contribution to Christian spirituality that eventually may have been one factor in the coming of the Reformation. To that extent, calling attention to her thought is also to commend her thought to Christendom at large.

I. ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND

When it comes to identifying her biographical facts, Margaret fares no better than most medieval figures. In addition to the various spellings of

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[1] Margaret Porette [note numerous spelling variations, e.g. Marguerite Porete], *Mirouer des simples ames* (ed. R. Guarnieri), *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pieta* 4 (1965) 351–708, is an edition of a manuscript copy of the French original. There are several Middle English versions edited in *The Mirror of Simple Soules: A Middle English Translation* (ed. M. Doiron), *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pieta* 5 (1968) 243–356. E. Colledge and R. Guarnieri accumulate the charges against Margaret in their appendix, "The Glosses by 'M. N.' and Richard Methley to the 'Mirror of Simple Souls'" (357–382). Possibly more easily accessible is the dissertation on which this published edition is based: M. M. Doiron, *The Mirrour of Simple Souls: An Edition and Commentary* (dissertation; Fordham University, 1964). This edition also contains invaluable historical sources in Appendix A (214–218). Translations into modern English are by C. Kirchenberger, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (London: Orchard, 1927), and C. Crawford, *A Mirror for Simple Souls* (New York: Crossroad, 1981; rev. [to include Margaret's authorship] 1990). My references to the *Mirror* will be by listing the page number in the Doiron dissertation and the page number of the 1990 Crawford translation. Translations from the Middle English, however, are my own.

her name, the case has been made that she is also to be identified with a "Maria of Valenciennes."[2]

Picture Margaret in a long gray cowl with her head covered by a similarly drab veil—the customary habit of the Beguines. This loose, quasi-monastic organization of women toward the end of the middle ages never ceased to test the Church's ability to maintain her flock pure and under control. The Beguines typically lived in communal houses under unofficial vows of poverty and chastity, but not usually of obedience. At its best they constituted a voluntary sisterhood displaying all of the virtues of a religious order at a time when the officially sanctioned religious orders were of highly uneven spiritual temper. The male counterpart to the Beguines were the Beghards. The Church's relationship to these alternative groups was ambivalent. Neither outright suppression nor annexation proved successful in trying to control their existence, practice or beliefs.

Margaret acquired her reputation as an itinerant preacher. She traveled in northern Europe in the company of a Beghard, her "guardian angel," and instructed groups of pious men and women in her views. Sometime along the turn of the century she wrote her book, which, given the fact that manuscripts survived even after suppression, must have been copied several times almost immediately. Margaret took the precaution of having the book checked for theological orthodoxy by three competent authorities. They agreed that there was nothing invidious contained therein, though they cautioned her not to disseminate the book to undiscerning folks.[3]

Nevertheless in 1306 Guy II, the bishop of Cambrai, declared the book to be full of error, and it was publicly burned. Margaret was instructed not to publish it any further. When she had a copy sent to Bishop John of Chalons-sur-Marne she was arrested and incarcerated in Paris. The inquisitor's name was William Humbert who was, as was customary, a Dominican. For a year and a half the Beguine remained in prison, withstanding various pressures to confess and recant. Eventually a commission was appointed that decreed the *Mirror* to contain numerous errors, and another panel ruled that consequently she was a relapsed heretic—apparently a charge that could be maintained apart from her confession. Margaret was turned over to the secular authorities and burned on May 31, 1310. According to contemporary accounts the large crowd was moved to tears as they watched the Beguine succumb to the flames in serenity.

Margaret is frequently linked to the so-called Brethren of the Free Spirit. In fact Edmund Colledge has referred to her as "the high priestess of liberty of the spirit."[4] This ill-defined group that persisted into the fifteenth century was often directly associated with the Beguines. Actually we know very

[2] R. E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California, 1972) 165–166. Lerner's work also contains some of the best summaries of Margaret's life and work (71–78, 200–208).

[3] *Mirror* 5–6; 19–20.

[4] E. Colledge, "Historical Data," *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 8.

little of the Free Spirit movement.[5] It was first described by Albert the Great in a scholarly list of errors (not intended as an historical report), and for two hundred years afterward the Church used this list to deduce what anyone who came under suspicion of being a part of the movement must believe. The inventory of sins supposedly perpetrated by the Free Spirits includes pantheism, antinomianism, the total disregard for the authority of the Church. In fact the movement tended to serve as label for anything dissonant or unwanted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in much the same way as "modernism," "secular humanism," and "new age" have been used in the twentieth. Unfortunately almost all of our information about the movement comes from its enemy, the Church. (Imagine what we would "know" about the Reformation if all of our information about it were derived from anti-Luther and counter-Reformation polemic.) When we look at the actual sources in which people conceivably associated with the movement speak for themselves a different picture emerges, as we shall see.

Margaret's book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, remained known from the middle ages on. A total of fifteen manuscripts in various languages have survived. Of course the story of Margaret Porette was a matter of ecclesiastical record. But it was not until 1946 that Romana Guarnieri demonstrated that the *Mirror* was in fact the book for which Margaret was condemned.[6] A parallel case would be if *Huckleberry Finn* had remained in circulation as having been written by an anonymous American and it were known that Mark Twain wrote a novel about a boy's travel down the Mississippi until finally someone realized they were the same book. Similarly on the basis of evident historical confluences and the identity of the propositions for which Margaret was condemned with the content of the *Mirror* it is quite clear (within the limits of historical methodology) that Margaret Porette was the author of the *Mirror*.

The Middle English manuscripts we have are derived from the translation by a certain M. N., about whom we know not much more than that he was a fourteenth-century Englishman. This translation, which was his second effort for the same book, is occasionally interrupted by his commentaries (signaled by "M." at the beginning and "N." at the end) in which he attempts to defuse particularly controversial remarks made by Margaret. Colledge and Guarnieri hypothesize that M. N. made his second translation specifically to stave off potential charges of heresy against the book and that, further, the specific points on which he comments are exactly the problem passages that may have constituted the evidence against Margaret. This hypothesis is certainly plausible inasmuch as there can be no doubt that the passages that M. N. selects for commentary are fairly explosive.

[5] See Lerner, *Free Spirit*. Cf. also the earlier, now more questionable, discussions in N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (Fairlawn: Essential, 1957) 149–194; G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967) 1.308–407. Lerner's work in particular serves to throw fresh positive light on E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan-Pickering, 1931) esp. 103–106.

[6] Her arguments, originally published in the *Osservatore Romana* in 1946, are reproduced in her 1965 edition of the MS.

II. THE BOOK

The Mirror of Simple Souls is a rambling dialogue, reminiscent of medieval allegories. The main characters are "Love" (the protagonist), "Reason" (who constantly queries Love for explanations of what she is saying), and "This Soul" (who has experienced what Love is talking about and at various times serves to prompt or support Love in her exposition). In addition various characters emerge to heighten the dramatic interest. The supporting cast includes the "Holy Church," the "Holy Spirit," and even the "Holy Trinity." They usually only say a line or two to support Love and then vanish again.

The title of the book is derived from the story of a princess in love with the great king, Alexander, who lives in a faraway land. She will never meet him, but she can always see his face in an image of him that she has had built. The point is that the soul experiences realities of God that cannot be described by words except indirectly—through a mirror image, as it were.

The overall structure of the book is loosely provided by the idea of the seven stages of the soul as she ascends into the presence of God, a notion that Margaret shares with many of her predecessors (e.g. Augustine, Bonaventure).[7] Briefly, the stages are:[8] (1) The soul is touched by the grace of God and freed from sin. She sets out to follow God's commandments and does so in great fear. (2) The soul follows Jesus in a life of asceticism. Through punctilious self-denial she attempts to mortify her physical nature. (3) The soul continues on the path of perfection, now by also trying to mortify her will through love. (4) The soul stops all works and concentrates only on meditation and contemplation in the perfection of love. (5) The soul sees what God is. She totally submerges her will in God's will. (6) Through the work of God—not the soul's—the soul sees that she is nothing. "And then is a soul in the sixth estate made free of all things, purified, and clarified—not glorified."[9] (7) The seventh stage has been reserved by God for everlasting glory. We do not yet have any idea what it is.

Within the context of medieval mystical piety, all of this is not in itself very controversial. We must look to the details, such as how the soul proceeds from stage to stage and the description of the soul in the fifth and sixth stages that caused the debate and ultimately Margaret's condemnation.

III. THE CHARGES

In this treatment I want to concentrate on three charges against the *Mirror* that played a role in Margaret's condemnation: quietism, antinomianism and pantheism. A contemporary chronicle (by William of Nangi) mentions formally only two propositions:

[7] Doiron, *Mirrour* xcvii–ci.
[8] *Mirror* 169–177; 127–133.
[9] Ibid. 176; 132.

1. That the sublated[10] soul takes leave of all virtues, nor is she any longer in their servitude, because she no longer has to obey them, but the virtues are obedient to her.

15. That this soul no longer desires the consolations or gifts of God, nor ought she to, nor is she able to desire them because she is totally intent upon God, and her intentness on God would only be hindered thereby.[11]

It is further a relatively safe assumption that the standard charges against the Free Spirits were also adduced against her. Colledge and Guarnieri make an interesting case that these charges could be substantiated within the text of the *Mirror*. They do so by arguing backwards from M. N.'s commentaries to the possible charges against which M. N. could be guarding.[12] Of these the standard accusation of pantheism (or "autotheism," as Lerner calls it[13]), is the only other one on which we will focus.

IV. THE CRUCIAL ISSUE

An appraisal of the legitimacy of Margaret's views has to involve many issues, not the least of which are matters of medieval jurisprudence and politics. Lerner suggests that Margaret may well have been sacrificed on the altar of political expedience.[14] Other matters would have to involve theological precedent and legitimate latitude of expression. But there is one particular issue that is pivotal for making sense of what Margaret said and why she said it that way. This is the issue of philosophical framework.

I have argued extensively that systematic theology is by necessity an interplay between the conclusions of Biblical theology and the philosophical concepts the theologian uses to express them.[15] The categories that

[10] I have chosen the word "sublated" to represent a difficult term, "annyentised" and "noughted" in Middle English, *adnachilata* in medieval Latin, which has also been translated as "brought to nothing" and as "annihilated," the most literal rendering. But because of the connotations that "annihilation" carries in English theological discourse with condemnation to nonexistence I thought it wisest to avoid that term. I settled on "sublated" (an intended allusion to Hegel) since it carries the double meaning of negation of self while being absorbed into something higher. I believe this squares well with Margaret's intentions.

[11] Doiron, *Mirrour* 217. Translation mine. Compare Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 358–359.

[12] These are eleven of the propositions brought up by the Council of Vienna against the Brethren of the Free Spirit: "3. That the soul is naturally blessed by the gift of God, and has no need of Scripture or understanding or intellect to attain to full knowledge of him. 4. That the soul brought to nothing in the love of her creator neither desires or rejects poverty or tribulation, Masses or sermons, fasting or prayers. 5. That the soul's true name is 'Oblivion.' 6. That contemplatives should not seek to increase in divine knowledge. 7. That the soul should save itself by faith without works. 8. That everything which men say of God is lies, and that they can say nothing about his goodness. 9. That the soul which has true freedom does nothing which could injure its inward peace, not in obedience to anyone. 10. That the soul can have a constant vision of the divine nature in this present life. 11. That souls brought to nothing in union with God must not labour to acquire virtues. 12. That those who love Christ's divinity no longer love his humanity, or feel or suffer. 13. That souls which are truly free are in no danger of sinning" (Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 372).

[13] Lerner, *Heresy* 1.

[14] Ibid. 76–77.

[15] W. Corduan, *Handmaid to Theology: An Essay in Philosophical Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

she uses to formulate her views will shape them and go a long way toward determining how they are expressed, frequently even by restating the content along philosophically suitable lines. Even though we ought not to give in to the idea that there is no right or wrong for the philosophical framework a theologian uses, it remains a fact that to understand a theologian correctly and fairly we must take her philosophical framework into account as given. The philosophy a theologian uses is the language in which she speaks to us.

For example, an important tenet of the sixteenth-century Reformation was Luther's dictum: *simul justus et peccator.* Given Luther's nominalist propensities it was not difficult for him to refer to the same person in two ways, once by pointing to his justified state and once by remembering the sinful realities of his life. If we want to speak in more Aristotelian language we say that there is a new, regenerate nature and an old, sinful nature. But how do you say *simul justus et peccator* in neo-Platonic? I believe that *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is one attempt to do exactly that.

The *Mirror* stands in the line of the medieval neo-Platonic mystical literature that leads us from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius through Scotus Erigena and Bonaventure. This philosophical language, in its various dialects, was by and large the mode of theological expression for most of the late medieval mystics.[16] That fact does not mean that as soon as we have a neo-Platonic "dictionary" everything about the *Mirror* will become clear to us—far from it. But it does mean that unless we make reference to the neo-Platonic framework we have no hope of ever coming to terms with what Margaret taught.

Among the ideas at the heart of neo-Platonic philosophy are the following: (1) the absolute simplicity and nonduality of God, which gives rise to his ultimate indescribability; (2) God's mediation of himself in creation and revelation, a mediation that in some way constitutes both an accessibility and an interference in a soul's knowledge of God; (3) the kinship of the soul to God that gives it the drive to return to its origin—a return, however, that can never occur through a simple act of will by the soul.

The Church's relationship to this form of thought was (once again) ambivalent. Pseudo-Dionysius was venerated. Erigena, despite his thinly veiled pantheism, only received local condemnation. For many centuries Platonic thought was the philosophical mode of preference, and someone as close in time to Margaret as Bonaventure (d. 1274) espoused mystical ideas not too far removed from those of Erigena (though not pantheistic). By the time period under our consideration, however, things were changing. Philosophical schools were multiplying. Aristotle had gained a strong foothold through the work of Thomas Aquinas. In the process of the controversies of the thirteenth century it had become clear that an unreflective adoption of philosophical ideas could lead to heresy. A case in point would be the early Arab-mediated Aristotelianism that first came to Europe bear-

[16] It is an essential ingredient to understand Meister Eckhart. Cf. K. G. Kertz, "Meister Eckhart's Teaching on the Birth of the Divine Word in the Soul," *Traditio* 15 (1959) 327–364.

ing a philosophical pantheism. In short, if we add the late-medieval drive to stamp out heresies to the lack of inclination to forgive unfortunate formulations on account of different philosophical frameworks it becomes obvious that the careful philosophical hermeneutic that I am advocating here was not likely to be invoked for Margaret.

V. A SECOND IMPORTANT ISSUE

One need not be guilty of Protestant polemicism in order to make the following point. It makes no sense to try to understand any late-medieval controversy (nor, for that matter, a controversy of any other time) apart from a consideration of political realities. In this case it means taking into account that it was always an overriding concern for the ecclesiastical authorities that the standing of the Church as supreme would not be violated.

This contention goes beyond two factors, each of which may have had some real impact in particular cases. The first is occasional local issues. As alluded to above, Lerner suggests that Margaret may have been burned ultimately to fortify the political standing of William Humbert. Similar points have been made for Meister Eckhart's indictment in Cologne. But in both cases, even though these motivations cannot be ruled out, the base of support for the condemnation was too broad to leave it with petty local politics. For example, Jacques de Fournier was a relatively uninvolved consultant in both cases, but he was a part of the Council of Vienne and he later became pope.[17]

The second factor is abuses of power by an individual. It is tempting to explain this, that, or the other act of ecclesiastical violence as a manifestation of the sinful human nature of the various officials involved. And again, there surely are examples thereof. But it still would be missing the point to stop here. There is no reason to assume that the people involved in Margaret's case were particularly more depraved than others. It would be very unfair to charge Fournier, for example, for not acting on the issues.

But the position of the Church was always an issue in itself. This had to be the case because Church and salvation were seen as mutually intertwined. God had entrusted his sacraments to the Church so that she, under the headship of the pope's authority, could administer salvation. E. H. Broadbent quotes Alvarus Pelagius, a Spanish Franciscan who was instrumental in the proceedings against the Beghards:

> The Pope seems to those who view him with the spiritual eye, to be, not a man but a God. There are no bounds to his authority. He can declare to be right what he will and can take away from any their rights as he sees fit. To doubt this universal power leads to being shut out from salvation. The great enemies of the Church are the heretics, who will not wear the yoke of true obedience. These are extremely numerous in Italy and Germany, and in Provence, where they are called Beghards and Beghines.[18]

[17] Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 359; cf. Colledge, "Historical Data" 11.
[18] Broadbent, *Pilgrim* 105.

Never mind whether this sentiment expresses true Catholic doctrine (it certainly does not at the end of the twentieth century). But it was precisely this sentiment that was held by those who indicted Margaret and many others. To disagree with the Church as supreme was to take issue with God and his revealed will. The only godly course of action was to suppress such dissent.

The point here is not to reduce all further theological discussion to the issue of power. Such would be a very unfair reductionism. But the point is to call attention to the fact that the matter of authority was paramount as a bona fide theological issue. Any position that implicitly or explicitly challenged the Church's supremacy received double attention. For us this means that it also needs to receive twice the attention. If Margaret said something controversial, that is important. If she said something controversial that undermined the Church, that is very important. If she said something that is controversial because it undermined the Church, that is crucial.

VI. ITEM 1: FAREWELL TO VIRTUES

The first issue to be addressed is that of quietism. To what extent does Margaret deny that a life of virtue is a requisite for salvation?

Margaret does indeed say, "The soul of such love, say Love herself, may say thus to virtue: I take leave of you. To those virtues to which this soul has been servant for many days." And again: "Virtues, I take leave of you for evermore. Now shall my heart be more free and more at peace than it has been. In truth I know well: Your service has been too hard." And further: "I was then your servant, but now I am delivered out of your dominion."[19]

The immediately striking thing about what Margaret says—and the indispensable key to understanding her point—is to notice the negative interpretation she gives to the virtues. A little further she proclaims: "I have long endured in great servitude in which I have suffered many gruesome torments and endured many pains. It is a miracle that I escaped with my life!"[20] What we see here is the virtues as antagonist, something one is glad to be rid of. Now that one has been found by love, one no longer has to endure the servitude of the virtues. Thus a case of quietism can surely be made against Margaret.

M. N. in his commentary right away places a positive (and more orthodox-sounding) construction on this saying. He presents a picture of the virtues as the shell of a nut that is difficult to penetrate but that one has to master in order to arrive at the sweetness of the kernel: the love of God. At that point the relationship changes. No longer are the virtues master of the soul, but the soul is mistress of the virtues. Thus to take leave of the virtues means not to be rid of them but simply to be in control of them.[21]

[19] *Mirror* 13; 30.

[20] Ibid. 14; 30.

[21] Ibid. 14–16; 31. R. Methley, the fifteenth-century translator of the English manuscript into Latin, takes an even rosier view of the matter. He interprets the taking leave of the virtues as being nothing more than the way in which one says goodby to an old and valued friend. Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 140.

As is usual with M. N.'s comments, this explanation is plausible and doctrinally palatable. One only wished that this is what Margaret meant. A simple reading of the text, however, does not yield the enslavement to the virtues as a necessary step toward finding love but as a hindrance.

M. N.'s interruption also turns the focus away from Margaret's description of what virtues are involved. She tells us that the soul takes no account of "shame, nor of worship, nor of poverty, nor of riches, nor of ease, nor of unease, nor of love, nor of hate, nor of hell, nor of paradise."[22] That list does not create the impression of having passed through a necessary stage of conventional religious virtues. It sounds like a radical reversal away from it.

Indeed, in a later part of the book this point is enhanced. Here we encounter Margaret's description of three types of souls: the perishing, the marred (or blemished), the sublated—those who have lost themselves in God. The souls that are perishing are the ones who have devoted themselves to a life of nothing but good works.

> This is the life of those who mortify the body through doing works of charity. And they have such great pleasure in their works that they have no knowledge that there is any better existence than the existence of works of virtue and deaths of martyrdom as they desire to persevere in this [life] by the help of meditation complete with prayers and the constant multiplication of good will. . . . And because these people believe that this is the best of all possible existences, these people have been blinded and so are perishing in their works.[23]

Marred souls are those who live in works but all their lives realize that there must be a better way. For these there is hope that they may find the way and become "sublated." But they need to undergo a complete reversal as they let go and allow God to start working in them.

M. N. again tries to soften this hard picture. He informs us that "perish" does not mean the perdition of these souls but only their missing out on something higher.[24] Unfortunately Margaret gives us no indication that she does not intend the straightforward meaning of her words. Surely she could have phrased things differently and used a word other than "perish" had she meant something else.

The key here lies in the aforementioned neo-Platonic scheme. In this framework the two concepts are indeed identical. Salvation is pictured as the ascent of the soul. Not to ascend—to dwell in the lower levels only—is in the final analysis to miss out on salvation. Thus "to perish" means "to miss out"—but that phrase means "to be lost."

But, given the chance to respond, M. N. might say something along the following lines: Is it not the case that, in the first three stages through which the soul must pass, good works are indeed a necessary measure?[25] Of course they are, but the whole point is that all of the earlier stages are

[22] *Mirror* 16; 31.
[23] Ibid. 88–89; 91.
[24] Ibid. 91; 93.
[25] Ibid. 169–172; 127–129.

preparatory and, in the final accounting, do not contribute to salvation but only hinder it. They are only intended to teach the soul to abandon all works and to rest in the love of God alone. Margaret's picture here is very much that drawn for us by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3: The law is our teacher to keep us in custody until we come to Christ and are saved apart from the law.

Thus Margaret writes the monumental words: "Thus [the soul] saves herself by faith without works, for faith surmounts all works, witness love herself."[26] M. N. immediately expostulates that the soul does not produce her own works, but God produces his works in her. The point is well taken (I believe Margaret would agree) but not germane. The bottom line is that, according to this Beguine, good works contribute nothing to our salvation. To attempt to save ourselves by our own works will only lead us to perish. Salvation comes by the love of God alone.

Thus Margaret states in her own way the proposition that is to be declared anathema by the Council of Trent 250 years later:

> That the impious is justified by faith alone—if this means that nothing else is required by way of cooperation in the acquisition of the grace of justification, and that it is in no way necessary for a man to be prepared and disposed by the motion of his will.[27]

Was Margaret guilty of quietism? If the charge means that she denied that the soul must cooperate with divine grace in a life of virtue to acquire salvation, then the answer is "Yes."

VII. ITEM 2: THE DEBT OWED TO NATURE

The charge of antinomianism followed right on the heels of the charge of quietism. Again the issue is similar: To what extent is the soul under obligation to any laws? Is there sin?

Margaret seems to leave the door wide open to this charge when she states: "This soul desires neither contempt, nor poverty, nor tribulation, nor disease, nor Masses, nor sermons, nor fastings, nor prayers, *and she gives to nature all that it asks without begrudging of conscience.*"[28] She repeats the same phrase again later and adds that such a soul is above the law of Christ.[29]

These statements appear to be representative of exactly the kind of libertinism of which the Brethren of the Free Spirit were accused. To give to nature all it demands can be seen as giving in to the lustful desires of the flesh anytime and anywhere.

But in order to sustain such a charge, one of two assumptions must be true: Either Margaret had an extremely low view of nature, or one as-

[26] Ibid. 27; 39.
[27] H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Church* (2d ed.; London: Oxford, 1963) 371.
[28] *Mirror* 20; 35 (italics mine).
[29] Ibid. 42; 51.

sumes that Margaret, as a leader in the Free Spirit movement, simply must have shared their libertinism. Neither one would be accurate.

As for the first assumption, Margaret did not entertain a low view of nature. Indeed she goes on, just a few lines below the second repetition of the affronting phrase: "But such nature is so well ordained through the joining together of the divine love with which the will of this soul is united, that it [i.e. nature] asks nothing against the ordinance of divine righteousness."[30] A little later she adds: "Such is her nature by pure righteousness, and such righteousness is divine righteousness which gives measure to this soul."[31] It is hard to see how Margaret could have expressed her rejection of libertinism any more clearly. Thus M. N. must surely be right this time when he says: "Now God forbid that anyone be so fleshly as to think that it should mean to give to nature any lust that leads to fleshly sin, for God knows well that it is not meant in that way."[32] The soul neither presents nor tries to present any righteousness of her own. God produces it in her. To give to nature what one owes it, then, simply means to live in harmony with nature the way God created it. God will not ask for anything through nature that contravenes his will.

Other superficially controversial statements must be understood in the same way. In the *Mirror* Reason asks what Love means when she says that "the soul is in her right freedom of pure unadulterated love when she does nothing contrary to the requirements of the peace of her inward being." Love's presumably unequivocal reply is that "she does nothing that will cause her to fall, that will go against the perfect peace of her spirit."[33] Colledge and Guarnieri still want to read this statement as saying that nothing that she does will harm her peace,[34] but the obvious meaning is that in her innocence the soul will avoid doing anything that would harm her peace.

Another apparently scandalous passage states: "For no more than God could sin or will to, can I sin if I shall not will to; such freedom has been given to all of me [*sic*] out of his full bounty by his love."[35] Once more, despite Colledge and Guarnieri's reservations,[36] the point is not that no action by the soul counts as sinful but that the soul has the freedom to avoid sinful acts. A similar interpretation must be given to the passage in which Margaret asserts that we can no more sin than can the Trinity.[37]

So we must address the fact that many interpreters have simply made our second assumption: that, as an alleged Free Spirit, Margaret must have taught Free Spirit libertinism. Then these commentators read the stereotypical Free Spirit doctrine back into the *Mirror*. Colledge and

[30] Ibid. 43; 51.
[31] Ibid. 44; 51. Crawford's translation is too unclear here to really make the point.
[32] Ibid. 22; 36.
[33] Ibid. 57; 64.
[34] Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 367.
[35] *Mirror* 151; the passage is omitted in Crawford.
[36] Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 372.
[37] *Mirror* 136; 121.

Guarnieri do exactly that when they show the possibility of lining up various statements made by Margaret with some of the propositions condemned at Vienne. Certainly it can be done, but that does not prove that what the Beguine meant was anything like what the propositions condemned. The truth is that, unless one assumed the stereotypical Free Spirit interpretation in advance, one would not get Free Spirit antinomianism out of the *Mirror*.

Leff admits that an objective reading of the *Mirror* does not substantiate antinomianism. But then, presumably because he is committed to the idea that Margaret must nevertheless be implicated, he charges that "it could easily lead to the full-fledged libertinism of the Free Spirit."[38] It seems hardly fair, however, to charge Margaret with a position to which hers could lead through misinterpretation. The charge is as empty as it was when it was leveled against Paul (cf. Romans 5–6). Both the Beguine and the apostle maintain that freedom in Christ does not lead to libertinism. If subsequent readers abuse the notion despite obvious caveats, the authors should not be faulted.

Now one wonders, if all of these statements are so crystal clear, why the impression of antinomianism and incipient libertinism should ever arise. Why did everybody get so mad at Margaret? The answer is that in one respect Margaret definitely leaves herself open to criticism. Among the works that she sees as neither requirements for salvation nor external obligations for the sublated souls are traditional works of religious devotion. As we have already seen above, the Beguine dismisses poverty, prayers, fasting, worship and the Mass as no longer binding.

Both M. N. and Richard Methley try to make Margaret's statements a matter of attitude. For example, Methley argues that the soul uses these means of grace as a channel of divine love, just not as authoritative over her. But at this point Colledge and Guarnieri are surely right in insisting that such an amelioration strains the language too much to be believable.[39]

No wonder that the Church was offended! To diminish the role of the sacraments in favor of personal piety rendered one irreconcilable, no matter what the framework. This is not to say (contrary to popular Protestant stereotypes) that the medieval Church did not encourage ardent personal devotion. Nothing could be further from the truth for the branch of the Church that includes Augustine, Gregory, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Francis and many others. But piety within the system could not be allowed to become a license for piety that thumbed its nose at the system. This point is

[38] Leff, *Heresy* 1.371. Leff goes on: "But with Margaret of Porete it did not go beyond a mystical pantheism which despised the distractions of the created world, when paradise had already been attained through union with God." This short quote contains at least three serious errors. (1) It misrepresents Margaret's name with "of." If Margaret was "of" anywhere, it would have been "of Valenciennes." (2) Leff brings up the perennial charge of pantheism, of which I shall attempt to clear Margaret below. (3) Margaret makes it crystal clear that no soul can attain the seventh and last stage on earth. Even the sixth is usually temporary. In addition Leff consistently misrepresents the date of Margaret's trial and execution as 1311 and he even alludes to a nonexistent confession by her.

[39] Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 376.

made all the stronger by Margaret's occasional reference to the Church as "Holy Church the Little" or "the Lesser" in favor of "Holy Church the Greater," which consists of those who have shared the soul's spiritual experiences.[40] Margaret definitely rejects all external observances as binding on the sublated soul.

It is Margaret's dismissal of the Church's iconography and of the eucharist as irrelevant that is the explanation for her sometimes bizarre statements on Christology. In Margaret's day the celebration of the Mass with the repetition of the sacrifice of Christ's body has become the focal point of Christian life. Consequently the Beguine reacts against this externality and concretization as much as against all others. Statements in which she seems to compromise the human nature of Christ need to be seen first of all as intending to deflect attention away from the host and from pictorial representations, not the historical Jesus.

In a dubious passage Margaret speaks of Christ as having three natures: divine, soul, body.[41] This arrangement certainly does not lend itself to accommodation to a Chalcedonian view of the hypostatic union. Colledge and Guarnieri invoke Valentinian gnosticism as at the root of this misconception.[42] But the subsequent passage makes it clear that Margaret understands the physical nature to refer to the host in the eucharist. In that sense her emphasis on devotion to the divine rather than to the human nature of Christ needs to be seen not as docetism but as putting the spiritual ahead of the external ritual.

Thus we see that Margaret may have run afoul of another proposition that the Church was eventually to anathematize at Trent:

> That justification once received is not preserved and ever increased in the sight of God through good works; but that these same works are only fruits and signs of justification, not causes of its increase.[43]

Was Margaret guilty of antinomianism? Again it depends on the definition of the term. If we mean by the term that she allowed for unbridled libertinism, the answer is clearly "No." She maintained steadfastly that God would produce his righteousness in the sublated soul. But if we mean by antinomianism that she considered the traditional pious works enjoined by the Church not to be the way in which God's grace is mediated, then the verdict would have to be guilty.

VIII. ITEM 3: THIS SOUL IS GOD

Probably the worst charge against Margaret, because it cuts across all confessional and theological boundaries, is that of pantheism (or "autotheism"). The offending passage reads:

[40] *Mirror* 45; 53.

[41] Ibid. 38; 48. Crawford commits the translator's unpardonable sin at this point and "corrects" Margaret to speak of only two natures.

[42] Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 381.

[43] Bettenson, *Documents* 371.

> I am God, says Love, for love is God and God is love, and this soul is God on condition of love, and I am God by nature divine. And this is hers by righteousness of love, so that this precious one beloved of me is taught and led by me apart from her, for she is turned to me within me, and this result, says Love, takes nurture.[44]

Note first of all that it is Love that is making this statement. Margaret has her state the Biblical identity of God and love (1 John 4:8) and the consequence that true and pure love is God. Love then implies that, insofar as the soul is absorbed by love, she partakes of love's divine nature. The point that must not be missed is the conditional nature of the soul's divinization.

One is (or ought to be) reminded here of similar statements made in literature roughly contemporary with Margaret. Even more audaciously than anything we read in the *Mirror*, the treatise *Schwester Katrei* (at one time erroneously attributed to Meister Eckhart) has the good Sister Catherine say to her confessor, "Father, rejoice with me, I have become God!"[45] Is this pantheism? Not likely in the way in which it was intended. Right before this exclamation we read of the experience about which Catherine is reporting: "She puts herself in a state of emptiness. Then God draws her into a divine light so that she *thinks* she is one with God *as long as it lasts.*"[46] Subsequent to the exclamation mentioned above she goes into a three-day trance and afterwards reports: "Yes, I am granted everlasting bliss. I have attained by grace what Christ is by nature. He has made me his joint-heir so that I shall never again lose it."[47] The Biblical allusion here is to Rom 8:17. Without wanting to delve into too lengthy an analysis of all that Catherine is saying here, this much is clear: Catherine is not asserting an ontological identity with God, the Lord and Creator of the universe. Instead she is expressing the intimate union with God that she has experienced by God's grace.

A similar caveat has to be observed in regard to Meister Eckhart, who has frequently been accused of pantheism. A statement in a sermon, which was subsequently condemned as heretical, reads: "I am so changed that he produces his being in me as one. By the living God, this is true! There is no distinction."[48] What Eckhart is referring to here is what God is doing inside the person, not a natural ontological identity, a point that the inquisition never managed to acknowledge.[49]

The same qualification needs to be applied to Margaret and the *Mirror*. She is not saying that the soul is God, not even that the soul becomes God. She is saying that the soul partakes of God insofar as she partakes of love (= God). What we see here is an intimate union with God on the basis of

[44] *Mirror* 49; 58.

[45] *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise* in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (ed. B. McGinn; New York: Paulist, 1986) 358.

[46] Ibid. (italics mine).

[47] Ibid. 359.

[48] Meister Eckhart, *Iusti vivent in aeternum*, quoted from Colledge, *Meister Eckhart* 188.

[49] Ibid. 54.

God's grace alone. Anything more would be not only squeezing more out of the statement in question than is warranted but also completely out of keeping with all that the Beguine says in the rest of the book—for example, that the sixth state is only temporary and that the seventh state is reserved by God as a unique experience in heaven.

At that, Margaret's descriptions of union with God leave nothing to be desired in terms of flamboyance. She likens the soul to a seraph with six wings.[50] With two she covers God's face, thereby indicating direct knowledge of him. With two she covers his feet, which shows the soul's participation in Christ's suffering. And with two she flies, whereby she never leaves the presence of God's sight and will.

Is this description orthodox? Of course it is, despite its hyperbolic expression. The NT teaches precisely the believer's unmediated presence in God and God in the believer. Teachings concerning the former are particularly found in the Johannine writings, and the latter is especially emphasized in the doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.[51] I do not intend to empty Margaret's writing of its impact by reducing it to time-honored theological formulations, but it is important to realize that she is not actually advocating doctrinal content beyond that of traditional formulations. The mode of expression, however, is that of a person who has come to a realization of the immeasurable grace of being in direct, personal relationship with the Infinite, an experience that for much of the rest of Christendom tends to remain a matter of words only.

Because Colledge and Guarnieri single out a particular point in this context, almost as though it were the final blow against the *Mirror*, a further clarification needs to be made—though by now it ought to be a matter of belaboring the obvious. They state in response to one of M. N.'s glosses:

> This is excellent, but it leaves unanswered one essential question raised by this, by the whole of the *Mirror*, by all teaching on "Liberty of the Spirit": is such union of grace, and of God's free gift, or is it of nature, attainable by the soul by its own efforts? This touches upon the Pelagian controversy, upon the great, centuries-long debate upon Grace and Free Will, upon the very roots of the Gnostic heresy; and it is surely hard for us to share M. N.'s conviction that Margaret taught what the Church teaches.[52]

It seems to me that the Beguine has left no room for doubt on the issue—unless one wants to read the stereotypical agenda for Free Spirit into her writing. Margaret's first stage begins with the soul being "touched by God by grace and being severed from sin."[53] Again and again she emphasizes the fact that the soul's experience is from grace, not from nature. At one point the Holy Spirit makes a brief appearance and says, "We [i.e. God] have in us . . . what we have by divine nature, and *she has it from us*

[50] *Mirror* 12; 30.

[51] Cf. my discussion of NT mysticism in the last chapter of W. Corduan, *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

[52] Colledge and Guarnieri, "Glosses" 371.

[53] *Mirror* 169; 127.

by righteousness of love, what she could not be."[54] Thus we see here a very similar statement to Catherine's: What Christ is by nature, she has become by grace.

In short, one has to be seriously disposed to seeing the alleged heresies of the Free Spirit movement in the *Mirror* not to get the clear picture that Margaret's mysticism is grounded in divine grace, not human nature. Whether she "taught what the Church teaches" is a different question. Since at Margaret's time (and also in the pre-Vatican-II days when Colledge and Guarnieri probably did their work) the Church taught that true grace is received only through her instrumentalities, Margaret did not in that sense teach what the Church teaches.

Was Margaret guilty of pantheism? One would have to invent a whole new meaning for the word "pantheism" to make that charge stick.

IX. CONCLUSION

The first part of my thesis for this exposition has been that in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* Margaret Porette propagated a number of views that the Church was probably correct in finding unacceptable by the standards of the day (though there is never any justification for the burning). The three main points are (1) that the soul is saved without contributions of any works of virtue, (2) that God produces virtues in the soul without benefit of the Church's mediation, and (3) that the soul enjoys direct union with God insofar as she is totally absorbed by divine love.

But the second part of my thesis is that we ought to take serious cognizance of her teachings nonetheless.[55] Conventional wisdom holds that the Protestant Reformation has some roots in late-medieval mysticism. Luther himself edited the *Theologia Germanica*. If so, then some credit needs to be given to the Beguine, who said, "She shall do nought, says God, but I shall do my work in her apart from her,"[56] and who became a martyr for this belief.

[54] Ibid. 77; 78.

[55] It is not my intention to make Margaret out to be an evangelical Protestant before her time. There certainly are a lot of things I would want to say differently, or that I would want to add to her reflections. E.g. I would have dearly loved for the *Mirror* to ascribe greater significance to the objective atonement in the cross. She does refer to it, but it does not seem to be central to her theology.

[56] *Mirror* 80; 82.

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