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BEGUINES: THE FIRST WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN CHRISTIANITY

A Time for a Return?

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The Beguines (pronounced "bay-geens") were women who initiated a radically new way of life for Christian women in the 12th century. Despite having no initiator or major leader, the movement caught fire and grew spontaneously in Low Countries. There was little interest in them, however, until a wave of enthusiasm over mysticism brought them to the forefront in the 1970's.

However, even when the Beguines drew a great deal of attention in medieval Europe, the impact of their contribution did not receive proper credit. Why? Who were they? Why did they flourish and why were they demolished by the Church? Finally, what is their significance for us in the 21st century? Is it time for a return of their spiritual movement? Marygrace Peters, O.P., believes that they indeed have something to offer Christianity in our era. In an article published in the journal *Spirituality Today*, Peters affirmed that "this medieval feminine movement offers a unique spirituality and community life for spirituality today."[1]

[1]Marygrace Peters, O.P., "The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed," *Spirituality Today* 43:1 (Spring 1991): 36–52, here at 36.

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Christian historians generally agree that the movement emerged between 1170 and 1180 in Liege (what is now Belgium). It rapidly reached its full flowering in the 13th and 14th centuries, having spread to France, Germany, and other Latin countries. It also "exhibited a rich diversity and a complex and heterogeneous flavor."[2] Men soon followed it; taking on this new form that originated with women, they were known as the Beghards.

Certain socio-historical and religious elements led to the burgeoning of the Beguines. The 12th century saw several forces moving head-on into each other, molding what Abby Stoner from the History Journal *Ex Post Facto* at San Francisco State University calls "space," or a creative "space." She says that this "space" ignited something new and refreshing in the medieval European Church. Although this "space" was unstable, it provided the opportunity for innovation and for new roles to take shape. Firstly, the "space" opened up new areas for work due to the decline of feudalism and the migration of rural people to urban communities, especially women who went to the cities to find employment. Secondly, the crusades left many widows in its wake, and young women found no husbands to marry and had no one to provide for them. As a consequence of this depletion of the male population, women stepped forward to fill the gap of laborers in urban society.

The third impetus came from a strong upswing in trade. Increases in commerce fed the materialist desires of those who could afford imported goods, including members of the clergy whose avarice and sexual immorality had deteriorated to the chagrin of the laity. The increase in materialism brought with it a strong backdraft for a life with greater meaning in keeping with Christ's teaching.

The Beguines were thus part of a reactionary force within the Church as an institution which had become much too powerful and far too rich to be a beacon of what Jesus came to preach: "blessed are the poor," "blessed are the meek," "blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice." With an aspiration to live the life of Jesus and the

[2]Peters, "The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed," 36.

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apostles, the laity in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and especially in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands) had a yearning to go back to the values of the Gospels. This fervor gave birth to the "vita apostolica" (also known as "vita evangelica"). The Beguines fuelled the engine of the "vita apostolica" together with Francis of Assisi and other mendicant orders. With the growth of "vita apostolica" or "vita evangelica" came a surge for the mystical life and a thirst for union with God that made monasticism an ideal.

The majority of Beguines, especially at the outset, came from the nobility and "largely from the new city merchant class."[3] These women were educated, creative, and moneyed, thus their rapid growth and way of life. The field was wide open for these women; therefore, "with their freedom of movement, economic independence and spiritual creativity, the Beguines carved out an unusually expansive—and controversial—niche for female religious expression"[4] not only by incarnating the Gospel in their own way but also in their spirituality and mode of mysticism.

First Women's Movement in the Church

The Beguines "have been called the first women's movement in Christian history."[5] They broke new ground outside the established structures of the Church and of society burgeoning out of their deep desire to put into practice the spirituality of the Gospels and committing to a nuptial relationship with God. Stoner spells out the distinctive elements of their way of life. It is generally agreed by church historians that Beguines were groups of religiously dedicated laywomen who

[3]Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 83.

[4]Abby Stoner, *Sisters Between Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, San Francisco State University Journal Archive, 26–47. http://userwww.sfsu.edu/epf/journal_archive/volume_IV,_no._2_-_sp._1995/stoner_a.pdf.

[5]Stoner, *Sisters Between Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, 26–47.

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- took no permanent vows,
- followed no prescribed rule,
- supported themselves with manual labor (especially embroidering),
- interacted with the "world" (therefore not cloistered),
- and remained celibate or could be married.

Since their celibacy was not permanent, they could marry at any time. Those who married usually continued to live within the Beguinage (the common dwelling or set of dwellings of the Beguines). They had no uniform dress and practiced voluntary poverty. The movement had no "founder," and at first there were no designated leaders. The Beguines were like a powerful wind that raced across Europe, gaining speed as each woman experienced the deepest desire to live the Gospel and not just preach it. The Beguines delved into a mysticism and spirituality of their own. Soon this mysticism became one of their most significant contributions. It was exemplified by Marie of Oignies, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete who was burned at the stake by a camouflaged political motivation of the Inquisition that overtly accused her of religious heresy. It is speculated that the real reason for the persecution of the Beguines was the desire by the hierarchy to bring the movement to a full stop, which it did for all intents and purposes in 1312.

Bernard McGinn, a proficient historian of the evolution of Western mysticism, distinguishes "four chronological phases":[6] a) The Beguines began as dedicated women who took on a lifestyle somewhat like nuns without taking vows; they continued to live in their own homes, either alone or with their parents. As most of them came from well-to-do families, they could set aside a room for themselves and practice a life of prayer and simplicity, dedicating themselves to the corporal works of mercy while they remained celibate. b) Little by little, these women began to gather together and live in common dwellings in a parish setting. c) Larger groups of cloistered Beguines began to serve hospitals

[6]Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* Vol. III: *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 32.

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and do other works of charity. d) Large Beguine communities and their associates developed into independent parishes called *curtes*, some of which have survived to this day in the Belgian *begijnhof*.[7]

McGinn is of the same opinion as Stoner. He believes that "the beguine style of the *vita apostolica* ranks among the most creative innovations of late medieval religion … [in addition to] key aspects of beguine life, especially their existence outside the cloister."[8] An uncloistered nun was simply unheard of at that time. Added to this was how "their independence of established religious rules of life gave them a special character."[9] Since their celibacy was not a life-time commitment and they were willing to have married couples as part of their community, it opened the doors for many more women to join the movement.

This very structure of the Beguine lifestyle made the clerics terribly uneasy. Women confined to the cloister were naturally excluded from "a major part of the vita apostolica: the ministry of evangelizing in the secular world."[10] Yes, they were allowed to prophesy, but "preaching was not: preaching was necessarily public, whereas prophesying could be practiced in private or through letters."[11] But the Beguines, because they were not cloistered, had the facility to preach, and their voices could be heard by the public at large. For the Dominicans and Franciscans, however, "the concept of a non-cloistered, unmarried religious woman, even if chaste, was disturbing; they too shared

[7]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 32.

[8]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 32.

[9]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 32.

[10]The injunction to protect women from sexual temptation was occasionally taken to extremes. To cite one example, elaborate curtains were erected lest a dying nun see the priest who administered last rites (Rosemary Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974], 244).

[11]Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, 244.

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the prevailing conception of the female gender as dangerous and potentially contaminating."[12] Francis of Assisi had a close relationship with his partner Clare, but he put her in a cloistered convent. Later, he said of Clare and her nuns: "Up to now the disease was in our flesh and there was hope of healing, but now it has penetrated our bones and is incurable."[13]

In the Middle Ages, women had to live under the auspices and control of men, either their father, husband, brother, or another male relative. The only other option was to enter the cloister as a nun or as an anchorite where the woman remained under the rule of a priest and/or bishop. That a woman or a group of women set out on their own raised many religious eyebrows. The Cistercians, for instance, stated in their statutes "that women were to be avoided at all costs, and one specifically stressed that no Cistercian abbot or monk should bless a nun."[14]

Stoner believes that there was a difference between the manner in which men saw women and the attitude women had towards themselves. She quotes Penelope Johnson from *Mulieret Monialis: The Medieval Nun's Self-Image*: "Women with a strong religious calling of any sort were more likely to see themselves as Christians first, and females second."[15] These contrary perceptions, which caused tension "between male attitudes towards women and female conceptions of themselves, constituted a major determinant in the course of the

[12]Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, 244.

[13]Frances Gies & Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1978), 88.

[14]Sally Thompson, "The Problem of the Cistercian Nuns in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries," in Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 227.

[15]Stoner, *Sisters Between Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, 28.

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Beguine movement,"[16] according to Stoner. To be fair, however, there were priests, theologians, and men among the laity who supported the Beguines and even took inspiration from them.

"Mary or Eve": Medieval Controversy Over the Status of Women

Since the Church recognized only two places for women—cloister or home, it was obvious that the Beguine women would be unwelcomed by the hierarchy. The stronger the Beguine movement became, the more suspicion they drew from the clergy. Notwithstanding the opposition of the institutional Church, the Beguines took their future into their own hands and moved forward. Thus, the attitude of the hierarchy and social norms added to the complexity of the Beguine relationship with the community.

Medieval society's attitude toward women in general was fret with contradictions. Women were perceived as both "Mary" and "Eve": as "Mary," they were the virgin and loving mother who had no sin, but every woman was simultaneously "Eve"—evil personified that led to the fall of Adam, the man. Peters paraphrases Eileen Powers from *The Position of Women*:

> women were looked upon as objects worthy of pedestal worship, since they compared favourably to the virgin mother of Christ, or were seen as sources of temptation who lured others toward a bottomless pit, and, as such, were denigrated as obstacles in the way of those who sought salvation.[17]

On one hand, the troubadours' romantic devotion to Mary elevated women in the eyes of men, while on the other, the Premonstratensian Abbot Conrad of Marchtal stated what many men accepted to be true: "the wickedness of women is greater than all other wickedness of the world … the poison of asps and dragons is more curable and less

[16]Stoner, *Sisters Between Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, 28.

[17]Peters, "The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed," 36.

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dangerous to men than the familiarity of women."[18] This attitude was in keeping with Tertullian, a prominent 2nd and 3rd century clergyman of the Church from Carthage. His influence was still felt in the medieval Church, and on women he wrote:

> You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. (*de Cult Fem* 1.1)[19]

In 1184, the Office of the Inquisition was established to rid the Church of heretics, and women were particularly persecuted by it, including many Beguines who were brought to trial. The Church did what it could to squelch the Beguine movement, putting them under scrutiny for heresy. Time and again the Inquisition pursued them until the climax of the attacks came on the Beguines accusing them of unauthorized and excessive pursuit of the apostolic life, declared at the ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311–1312) with the decree *Cum de Quibusdam Mulieribus*, issued by Pope Clement V with the approval of the council. It demonstrated the kind of hostility that these women encountered when they ventured into affairs considered beyond their reach:

> We have been told that certain women commonly called Beguines, afflicted by a kind of madness discuss the Holy Trinity and the divine essence, and express opinions on matters of faith and sacraments contrary to the catholic faith, deceiving many simple people. Since these women promise no obedience to anyone and do not renounce their property or profess an approved Rule, they are certainly not "religious" although they wear a habit and are associated with such religious orders as they find congenial …. We have therefore decided and decreed with

[18]Quoted from Caroline Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 75.

[19]Quoted from Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 167.

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> the approval of the Council that their way of life is to be permanently forbidden and altogether excluded from the Church of God.[20]

According to Peters,

> [There was an unspoken] declaration that was at least mildly suggestive of the male fear of female sexuality that was characteristic of the time. The female population greatly outnumbered males, due to the hazardous effects of wars, crusades, feuds, and other mostly male endeavors. Viewed as a surplus commodity, paltry value was placed upon female life and welfare. Women banded together for mutual support, security and protection, and they would not allow themselves to be excluded from expressions of religious opportunity that permeated their society.[21]

The Middle Ages saw the proliferation of women who decided to unite themselves in a way not seen before. The Beguines seemed unafraid to confront both the political and religious authorities of their times. They were dedicated and convinced of their call from God and their mission to pray, work, and serve. Many Beguines felt drawn to the mystical life and they spearheaded a new mysticism. Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), a Benedictine abbess of male and female communities of monks in the twelfth century, and whose popularity rose at the end of the 20th and into the 21st century, "issued the opinion that the decadent society and church of her time were the result of masculine weakness of a kind that must be overcome through the agency of women of integrity. This, she said, 'was the *tempus muliebre*, the era of woman.'"[22] Such was the case specifically in the Low Countries of Europe.

The Inquisition reached its highest level of cruelty toward women with the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as *Hammer of Witches*, a treatise on the prosecution of witches written in 1486 by

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[20]R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1970), 330.

[21]Peters, "The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed," 37–38.

[22]Peters, "The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed," 38.

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two Dominican monks, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. Edo Nyland (*The Witch Burnings: Holocaust Without Equal*) said that the two monks "assembled many fairy tales and magic stories, nightmares, hearsay, confessions and accusations and put this all together as factual information in what became the handbook for the witch hunters, examiners, torturers and executioners"[23] of the Inquisition.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* is arguably one of the most infamous books ever written, due primarily to the position it was given during the Middle Ages. It served as a guidebook for inquisitors and was designed to aid them in the identification, prosecution, and dispatching of witches. The authors of the *Malleus* addressed those voices in no uncertain terms, stating that "Whether the Belief that there are such Beings as Witches is so Essential a Part of the Catholic Faith that Obstinacy to maintain the Opposite Opinion manifestly savors of Heresy." Estimates of the death toll during the Inquisition worldwide range from 600,000 to as high as 9,000,000 (over its 250-year long course); either figure is a chilling number when one realizes that nearly all of the accused were women, and consisted primarily of outcasts and other suspicious persons such as old women, midwives, Jews, poets, and gypsies. Anyone who did not fit as a pious *Christian* within the contemporary view was suspect, and easily branded as a "witch"—usually to devastating effect.[24]

This handbook was the standard against which people (mostly women) were tested to see if they were witches. Based on the *Malleus Maleficarum,* hundreds of women were tortured and burned at the stake for supposedly being witches. The Dominican authors said of women:

> … a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men … since women are feebler both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come under the spell of witchcraft. For as regards intellect, or the understanding of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature than men …. But the natural reason is

[23]Edo Nyland, *The Witch Burnings—Holocaust Without Equal* (1997). http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/cienciareal/cienciareal12.htm.

[24]Nyland, *The Witch Burnings—Holocaust Without Equal.*

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> that she is more carnal than a man as it is clear from her many carnal abominations. And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib from the breast which bent as it were in a contrary direction of man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives … and all this is indicated by the etymology of the word, for Femina comes from Fe [meaning "faith"] and Minus [meaning "less"], since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith. Therefore, a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to adjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft.[25]

They assumed that women were naturally of "less faith," and cited the etymology of the word "femina" (Latin for "female") and said that "fe" meant "faith" and "mina" meant "less."[26] This was a very skewed judgment and it shows plain ignorance. They seemed to be unaware of the fact that "femina" actually comes from the Latin word "fellare," which means "to suckle."

When Pope Clement V, following the recommendation of the Council of Vienna in the early 14th century, declared in no uncertain terms that the Beguines were forbidden to live their way of life, several groups continued to do so. But the horrors of the Inquisition, in its relentless pursuit of witchcraft and in the stamping out of heretics, deterred many women from pursuing the Beguines' lifestyle. This is one of the reasons that led to their decline. Nevertheless, some Beguines continued in defiance of the institutional Church.

It should be stated here that four years after the publication of the "handbook," the Inquisition finally condemned Kramer and Sprenger for their excessive pronouncements on witchcraft and found their conclusions to have very little substance. Unfortunately, the damage had been done and their unfounded, sometimes bizarre, summation on how to discern the elements of witchcraft lingered like a pall over European society up to the 19th century.

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[25]Quoted by Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 170. Taken from J. Sprenger & H. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (London: Pushkin Press, 1948), pt. 1, q. 6.

[26]Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 170.

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The New Mysticism of the Beguines

The Beguines opened new pathways in the field of mysticism. The giants of Beguine mysticism were Hadewijch (ca. early to mid-thirteenth century), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212–1281/1301), and Marguerite Porete (1250–1310). They express something bold and refreshing in the manner of their relationship with the Divinity, specifically concerning the "God" beyond God—that is to say, the "Godhead" that cannot be known beyond the "God" that we can somehow describe and comprehend, albeit in a faltering manner. They brought a new freedom concerning the dynamisms of the body and psyche in their mystical interactions with the Godhead. It is possible that the relative freedom of their lifestyle also gave them the audacity to bring this freedom into their intimacies with the Godhead, and into the way in which they expressed it. Yes, they picked up on the notions of "courtly love" as symbolized by the scriptural *Song of Songs* and which were typical of their era, but they traverse beyond that and break boundaries along the way. Each one expanded the space where they experience the Godhead for brief or protracted moments, although each in different way. Thus, it is worth the effort to dig a little deeper into each one's contribution because they do have something to say to 21st century spirituality.

Hadewijch of Antwerp

The identity of Hadewijch is clouded with uncertainty. Among the 111 pious women on record with the name Hadewijch in the 12th and 13th centuries, medieval scholars are of the opinion that Hadewijch, the mystic author, is a Beguine, Flemish, and from a noble class. Based on her writings, her education was quite extensive for a woman of that era.

> Hadewijch, whose works are considered to be the earliest vernacular prose in the Low Countries, wrote thirty-one letters, forty-five poems in stanzas, fourteen visions, and sixteen poems in couplets. She is familiar with the Latin language, rules of rhetoric, numerology,

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> Ptolemaic astronomy, many of the Church fathers, and with most of the canonical twelfth-century writers.[27]

She lived around the area of Antwerp. Her letters, poems, and accounting of her visions indicate a high level in the mystical life and a tremendous ability to express her spiritual experiences in a language that is complex but most eloquent. Hadewijch also appears to be the leader of a Beguine community. Over time, however, her standards and uncompromising attitude toward the Beguines' way of life turned her community against her. There is also the possibility that jealousy played a part in her demise—medieval scholars surmise that some of her sisters were envious of her special mystical gifts. Whatever the circumstances may be, things escalated until members of her community undermined her authority and exiled her. Moreover, they spread terrible rumors about her so that the rest of society refused to take her in. This elimination of Hadewijch from her community is all the more tragic because at that time, a woman alone is *de facto* ostracized from society. It is simply not acceptable and a woman who lived alone led to accusations of witchcraft or an immoral life-style. From her letters and poems, we infer that she probably died taking care of the sick, perhaps lepers, while continuing to write.

With regard to her mysticism, Hadewijch was initiated early. "Since I was ten years old," described Hadewijch,

> I have been so overwhelmed by intense love I should have died during the first two years when I began this, if God had not given me other forms of strength than people ordinarily receive, and if he had not renewed my nature with his own Being.[28]

Stoner believes that "with this sanction—even compulsion—from God Himself," Hadewijch, and later Mechthild of Magdeburg (who was of the same genre of Beguine mysticism), were "able to disregard and

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[27]Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 180.

[28]Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B., ed. Richard J. Payne (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 69 (Letter 11).

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transcend the misogynist ideology propounded by male clerics."[29] They acted against all institutional odds, proof enough of how powerful the commitment of these two Beguine leaders was to their understanding of God as "minne"—Love with all its profound and incomprehensible meanings. Paul Mommaers, in the Preface to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, confirms that, of the two, "Hadewijch … is undoubtedly the most important exponent of love mysticism and one of the loftiest figures in Western mystical tradition."

Mommaers explains that "the most striking hallmark of love mysticism" that sprang forth in the second half of the twelfth century

> is its strongly emotional and ecstatic character. The touch of Love also throws the minds and senses of these persons into commotion, so violent indeed that all sorts of psychosomatic phenomena arise from it. And it seems that the experience of oneness and Love must go hand in hand with a psychological withdrawal from self that usually finds its reaction in visions.[30]

Vision 7 of Hadewijch reads thus:

> On a certain Pentecost Sunday I had a vision at dawn … my heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seems to me that if I did not content my Beloved, and my Beloved did not fulfill my desire, dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail.[31]

Despite the authenticity of this ecstasy, both McGinn and Mommaers emphasize that Hadewijch did not see ecstasies as the object of her spiritual life. Mommaers continues: "what she principally wants to make clear is that her attraction for 'fruitive being-one' [a term from Hadewijch] is a sign of non-full-growness, and that in mysticism what

[29]Stoner, http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguine1.htm.

[30]Paul Mommaers, Preface, in Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xiii.

[31]Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 280.

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matters is so to grow up that one is enabled to live wholly other aspects of the being-one with God."[32] In fact, Hadewijch deems that one can have a deeply mystical life without having such ecstatic experiences, and even more central is her experience of "violent longing" (PS 7, 60) for "being-one" with the God beyond God. As she says in Vision 1, she knows quite well that she has to mature spiritually: "And that desire which I had inwardly was to be one with God in fruition. For this I was still too childish and too little grown-up."[33]

From a historical perspective, perhaps the reason why her works and her name were buried and practically forgotten for about four hundred years was because she was a Beguine and because she was exiled from her Beguine community. As a matter of fact, even in her own era it was only because of John Ruusbroec, the mystic and writer, and his disciples who admired her and her works that she was known in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It was not until 1838 that Hadewijch was rediscovered in Brussels by several researchers of medieval figures. Thus, it seems that now is truly the right time to bring forth her richness.

"Minne," translated as "Love," is the central theme and ultimate value of Hadewijch's spirituality and lived experience. The word "love" in English, however, does not capture the meaning of "minne" as she perceived it. Throughout her poems, letters, and visions, she mentions at least seven names or works of "minne"/"Minne" or love/Love. Maturing in "minne," love, means growing toward "being one" with the Godhead beyond God who is the *being* of "Minne." In her *Poems in Couplets* 16, entitled *Love's Seven Names*, she lists "minne's" names or works: "chain," "light," "living coal," "fire," "dew," "living spring," and "hell."

"Love is truly a 'chain,' because she binds and grasps everything in her power. … For Love, midway, withdraws consolation. … I think

[32]Mommaers, Preface, in Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xiv.

[33]Mommaers, Preface, in Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xxi.

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I shall die of pain" (PC 16, 15–24). The "chain" pulls her in through consolation. She knows, however, that consolation will dissolve, for soon the "light" of "love" shows us the truth in us that is not "love." But "Love" remains a "chain" that binds her to God in spite of this negative dark side. As the poem continues, "Love" is "light" that reveals everything in us that is not "Love," so that "Love principally condemns us" (PC 16, 53–54).

The third and fourth names flow from the first two. "Love" is, then, a "living coal" and "fire." Hadewijch says that "Minne" sets us "aflame" this way:

> It makes the proud man timid …
> It places the pauper in a kingdom …
> until it comes back again to the fire …
> Burns to death, engulfs and consumes …
> … She burns to death
> Good fortune, success and adversity:
> All manner of being are the same to fire.
> Someone we love or someone we hate, refusal or desire,
> Winning or forfeits, convenience or hindrance,
> Gain or loss, honor or shame …
> This Fire makes no distinction. (PC 16:72, 75, 83–85, 87–89, 94–96, 99)

When "fire" consumes, it turns everything into itself and then to ashes. The person usually experiences a sense of loss as though nothing matters anymore. Mystics, whether they are Buddhists, Hindus, Sufis, Christians, or from other religions or philosophies, refer to this as a state of "indifference." Once the individual has let go of everything, all that remains is nothing and from there comes a consciousness that is surrendered to the One Consciousness. The illusions of our small human perceptions are thus dissipated by the sun of an impenetrable Reality that goes by many different names.

Hadewijch used daring and very uncomfortable language. This was often unnerving to the people of her own time, and even to those in the present, when she described the human as "being one" with the Divine mystery. She saw the energy of "minne" in the universe, in human beings, and in "Minne," i.e., Divine Love in the Trinitarian Godhead. For example, she portrayed God's "Love" as an intimate "kiss," or

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that which "condemns," or as "hell." Thus, the 5th name of Love is "dew"; it is our "kiss" with God. She expresses it as sensually ecstatic. It is the same "kiss" of the unplumbed forces within the Godhead:

> Love drinks in these kisses and tastes them to the end.
> As soon as Love thus touches the soul,
> She eats its flesh and drinks its blood. …
> To the indivisible kiss—That same kiss which fully unites
> The Three Persons in one sole Being. (PC 16, 115–116, p. 355)

From that "kiss" comes the 6th name of "minne," a "living spring": "This flowing forth and this reflux of one into the other, and this growth in God, surpasses mind and understanding" (PC 16, 129–131). She saw God as eternal movement, flowing in and out of us in an endless flow, like water that rises, turns, returns, and jets into the sky in an artisan well.

"Hell is the seventh name of this Love wherein I suffer" (PC 16, 150). Why is Love "hell" even as it is experienced simultaneously as a "living spring"? The Beguine expounds:

> Forever to be in unrest,
> Forever assault and new persecution;
> To be wholly devoured and engulfed
> In her unfathomable essence,
> …
> In the deep, insurmountable darkness of Love.
> This outdoes the torments of hell. (PC 16:158–165)

Those of us who have not reached this intimacy with the Godhead of "Love" cannot understand what this experience is. But …

> He who knows Love and her comings and goings
> Has experienced and can understand. (PC 16, 165–166)

Her spirituality expands as she says, in Vision 1 (325), "live as Man"—that is to say, live the full humanity just as Jesus did. In Vision 14 (155), she gives the reason why: "in order that I might taste Man and God in one knowledge." Mommaers summarizes what this "one knowledge" is:

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> The being-one with God demands of man that he is man; the experience must not, exclusively or by preference, aim at the Godhead; it must also—at the same time—be able to taste everything that belongs to the concrete, disconcerting, human Humanity.[34]

In modern idiom, we must be totally human and totally divine in order to be in "being one" in the Godhead. After all, as Ruusbroec quotes Hadewijch, "we all wish to be god with God."[35]

Besides the seven names of "minne"/"Minne," the most significant spiritual insights of Hadewijch focus around the following:

- Jacob conquers God (L 12: 174)
- Conquer me that I may conquer you,
- In your unconquered power. (PS 19: 53)
- The Rhythm of the Trinity (L 17)
- Unfaith (V 13: 226–234; L 8: 27–71; PC 10: 87–102)
- The Abyss (L 18)

Together these images create a perfect storm where the soul is absolutely engulfed in the Godhead. The novice state is over in the spiritual growth of the soul. After the experience of consolation, it is time for the "battle with God" (Gen. 32: 22–32) as in the story of Jacob wrestling with God, which Hadewijch is prone to refer to. Just as Jacob spends the entire night in combat with God on the day before he goes to battle with Esau over their father's blessing, so does every human consciousness that lives in God's presence do battle with God. In the words of Hadewijch, the battle goes on as "chain," "light," "living coal," "fire," "dew," "living spring," and "hell." But, just as Jacob emerged the next morning, so does the person. Jacob called the place Peniel because he said, "I have seen God face to face and survived." From that day on, his name was changed to "Israel," which means "he that struggled with God." For Hadewijch, each of us must be in mystic conflict with forces both inside and outside ourselves.

[34]Mommaers, Preface, in Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xxiii.

[35]Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 16.

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Like Jacob, however, we will emerge victorious. Hadewijch thus uses poetry in the language of war. She says, speaking to God, "conquer me that I may conquer you." She dares to say that the human person will conquer God after God has conquered the person.

Hadewijch is very realistic. She knows that while these battles are personal within the self, there are also sufferings inflicted by society from the outside, such as in the way she suffered eviction from her community and from society. Just as Jacob came out of the battle with God with a "limp," so will the individual who struggles with "minne" bear the scars of combat. The "limp" in the scriptural text is a sign that Jacob is wounded by God, and the message is that God wants us as much as we want God. In fact, we cannot escape God. If the soul talks about things within itself, that is God, and if the soul talks of things outside itself, then that is God, too. Hadewijch makes "four paradoxes of the divine nature … based on the Trinitarian hymn 'Alpha et Omega, magne Deus,' ascribed both to Abelard and to Hildebert of Lavardin."[36]

> Above all things, below all things;
> Outside all things, within all things;
> Within all things, but not included;
> Outside all things, but not excluded;
> Above all things, not elevated;
> Below all things, not subjugated.[37]

From Jacob's journey-battle, Hadewijch speaks of the movement into the "rhythm of the Trinity" of the Godhead. Her presentation of the Trinity is the Godhead in constant movement: "He rests in nothing but the tempestuous nature of his profusely overflowing flood which flows back and forth over all" (L 22, 252–255).[38] Here she says that "God's countenance is invisible for 'those who have never tasted human and divine love in one being,' the flowing out and back of all things in

[36]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 212.

[37]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 212.

[38]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 213.

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God" (V 14, 102–108).[39] She employs the sensually provocative word "taste." Although God is "invisible," we can "taste" both "human and divine love in one being." It seems almost contradictory that God who is unknowable and invisible can be "tasted."

The eternal movement in God is like a spinning "disk" in a "whirlpool" where Hadewijch is "swallowed up." In Vision 12, she says:

> And in that very instant, I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the whirlpool upon the circling disk, and there I became one with him in the certainty of union … In that depth I saw myself swallowed up …. (V 12: 187–192, 206)

This, however, brings the discussion to "one of the most original and difficult aspects of her mystical teaching,"[40] that of "unfaith." McGinn explains that "unfaith" is a "mysterious state" that

> occurs when the soul's frustrated desire passes beyond humility and knowledge to a consciousness in which she ceases to believe in the faithfulness of minne. This indifference to, even hatred of, love's consolation allows her to engage in a far deeper struggle with love and love's own grounds. "Abandoning minne for the sake of minne compels minne to surrender herself to the soul."[41]

Hadewijch writes:

> They called continually for fruition and did not believe in the love of their Beloved; it rather appeared to them that they alone were loving and that love did not help them. Unfaith made them so deep that they wholly engulfed minne and dared to fight her with sweet and bitter. (V 13, 226–234) …
>
> The fruition overcame me as before, and I sank into the fathomless depth and came out of the spirit in that hour—of which one can never speak. (V 13, 319–323)

At this stage, the individual has ventured into the deep forest of the "Cloud of Unknowing." It is the beginning of the "dark night of

[39]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 210–211.

[40]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 209.

[41]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 209.

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the soul." This is the place where all the old consolations and "feeling good" sentiments are gone, and where the individual now falls into the abyss of the Godhead. It is like having no gravity. The soul is floating without any foothold anywhere. Many come to the point where the individual does not care about anything anymore. In modern psychoanalysis, it might seem like clinical depression, but actually it is not. Although, let me be clear, clinical depression is not the "dark night" in mystical terms. Everything in the past that gave meaning and purpose has become dry. The individual must now come face to face with who they really are and where they feel "indifferent" while, at the same time, being totally given to conditional love or "minne." At this point, however, God, as the soul has known "God," breaks out of all our human imagery. In fact, it is the entrance into the "Cloud of Unknowing," as it is called by the anonymous monk of the late 14th century, author of the book of the same title.

Mechthild of Magdeburg

Mechthild of Magdeburg—little is known of her except through her writing. Not much of her personal history has come down to us, although we know that she was probably born in 1208, that her divine revelations began at the early age of 12 years old, and that in her early 20's she fled to Magdeburg to become a Beguine. Like Hadewijch, she played an authoritative position in the community and she wrote in the vernacular, Middle Low German (although the originals have been lost and only translations are extant). Hadewijch seemed to have written for her community while Mechthild addressed both her Beguine community and all "friends of God."[42] Most importantly, Mechthild, as Hadewijch, wrote of "minne" in the realm of "courtly love," and of the power movement in the ineffable Trinitarian Godhead where we should all dwell. Mechthild was also one of the great mystics of the 13th century, and, in the same light as Hadewijch, she saw herself as a messenger of God.

[42]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 222–224.

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In the Middle Ages, visions are referred to as "showings." When individuals such as Hadewijch, Angela of Foligno, and Julian of Norwich speak of "showing," they are speaking of visualizations, images or symbols, and words that take over them, and they experience God communicating with them in any or all of these forms. According to McGinn, there are three major images in Mechthild, each with its own content, as found in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*: ""flowing' (vliessen), 'courting' or 'playing at love' (minnespielen), and 'sinking' (sinken)."[43]

The image of "flowing" is very much in keeping with the Platonic paradigm of the First Principle—that from which all things come forth and then return to. Mechthild writes:

> I shall greet (gruos) the sublimity … and the wondrous oneness of the Holy Trinity. Out of it has flowed forth immaculate all that was, that is, that ever shall be. There I must one day enter again. How shall that happen? I must crawl back, for I am sinful. … I must fly with the feathers of doves. … I must soar in all things above myself. When I am utterly spent, then I shall enter. (FL 7:25 [275, 2–120])

Mechthild believed in the pre-existence of the soul, that it first existed in the Trinity. This belief did not go well with many Church officials. Her image was that we dwell in the Trinity and when the Godhead can no longer hold us back, we burst into reality here on earth: "When God could no longer hold himself within, he created the soul and gave himself to her as her own from the greatest love" (FL 1:22 [18:35–40]).[44] She says later on that the entire person, body and soul, pre-existed in the Creator since eternity (paraphrase of FL 3:9 [87:40–49]).[45]

Mechthild does not use the term "minne" as often as Hadewijch does, but she does take it much further in the sexuality of her images. The second flowing image of Mechthild is the "Playing (and Leaving)

[43]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 231.

[44]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 233.

[45]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 432 (notes).

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the Game of Love." In *Flowing Light*, she says, "Just when the game is at its best, one has to leave it" (1:2). Mechthild personifies "minne" as Lady Love, Lady Knowledge who says to her, "you are an eager bride in your and God's love-bed," and Lady Contemplation. Mechthild often becomes erotic in her book of experiences:

> Him shall I, the least of souls, take in my arms, eat him and drink him and have my way with him. … No matter how high he dwells above me, his Godhead shall never be so distant that I cannot constantly entwine my limbs with him. And so I shall never cool off. (FL 2:22 [55:16–56:22])[46]

And in *Flowing Light* (5:25), God responds in like manner:

> I cannot be completely intimate with her unless she is willing to lay herself in utter repose and nakedness in my divine arms, so that I can play with her. For it was for this that I surrendered myself into her power … and she shall ever more in soul and body soar about and play to her heart's content in my Holy Trinity and drink herself full like a fish in the sea.[47]

Although other mystics, even male ones, use eroticism, it is Mechthild who is premier in this language of sexuality, taking it as far as suggesting sexual intercourse with God. But to stop there would be to underestimate the depth of Mechthild's spirituality. She is clear that as wonderful as it is, insinuating an orgasmic union, it is not the goal, and she knows the "sinking" experience that follows these physical heights. She speaks of the stage of "estrangement" which seems similar to Hadewijch's experience of "unfaith" or to what John of the Cross refers to as "the dark night of the soul." McGinn describes it as such: "But the closest form of union with God in this life, as paradoxical as it may seem, will be through imitating God and Christ in 'flowing down,' or 'sinking' away from ecstasy into pain, humility, and even into estrangement from God." In Mechthild's words, "If you want to

[46]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 433 (notes).

[47]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 236.

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have love, you must leave love" (FL 2:23 [58:55–56]).[48] She personifies this loss as Lady Estrangement:

> After this came Constant Estrangement from God and enveloped my soul so completely that the blessed soul said, "Welcome, very blessed Estrangement. Fortunate am I that I was born—that you, Lady, shall now be my chamber-maid, for you bring me unusual joy and incomprehensible marvels and unbearable delight as well. But, Lord, you should take delight from me and let me have Estrangement from you." (FL 4:12 [125:65–69])[49]

This is not the joyful delight of the senses but the feeling of losing intimacy with God, of entering into the great darkness; she knows how close she has become to the Godhead that is totally unknowable and unfathomable.

It is a tragic historical fact but, as Stoner relates,

> all Beghards and Beguines alike were condemned as heretics, excommunicated, and outlawed. Their property was taken to serve for pious purposes, for the support of the inquisitors, or for repairing city walls and roads. Between 1366 and 1378 remorseless persecution raged against them throughout Germany; but even then they found advocates, especially among the secular magistrates, and Gregory XI was finally prevailed upon to repeat the distinction between orthodox and heretical Beguines and Beghards, and to tolerate the former.[50]

While Hadewijch was exiled from her community for her uncompromising ways, Mechthild fell under persecution by Church magistrates, and she was dogged throughout her career by Dominican

[48]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 240.

[49]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 435 (notes).

[50]*The Beguines and Beghards* from Christian Classics Ethereal Library at Calvin College, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc6.iii.xii.vi.html?highlight=beguines#highlight and http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc5.ii.xii.vi.html?highlight=beguines#highlight.

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friars who accused her of heresy.[51] But she was not afraid to take them on and denounce immoral clerics and politicians as "goats" and "Pharisees." Like Hadewijch, Mechthild stood firm in her position as God's intended mouthpiece, and appealed to Him directly for protection:

> I was warned about this book and told by many that it should not be preserved, but rather thrown to the flames. Then I did what from childhood I have done when trouble overcame me: I betook myself to prayer. … "Lord, now I am troubled: Must I walk uncomforted for Thy Glory?"[52]

Stoner relates that in "the end, however, Mechthild's resolve buckled; at the age of sixty-two, she fled to the monastery at Helfta, a center of German piety." The two great mystics, Hadewijch and Mechthild,

> with their powerful pens and original minds, appear to have internalized very few constraining attitudes toward their own femaleness, they were not able to withstand the harassment of the male-dominated Church. As the sphere of self-determination for pious laywomen narrowed to the point of imperceptibility, Mechthild's retreat to conventual life was typical of many Beguines' destinies.[53]

Marguerite Porete

Among the three major Benguine mystics, it is the Northern Frenchwoman, Marguerite Porete, who paid the price for her beliefs with her life. McGinn asserts that she challenged her contemporaries and still does so for us even today. He says that she was "bold and uncompromising" in her spirituality which finally led to her execution

[51]Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 237.

[52]Stoner, *Sisters Between Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, 30.

[53]Stoner, *Sisters Between Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, 31.

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as a heretic on June 1, 1310.[54] But Marguerite's book, *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and Those Who Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love*, came back into the mainstream only in the second half of the 20th century, together with many other forgotten mystics. The return of her book to the discourse on mysticism spurred a debate—are some of her teachings heretical or not?

There is a great deal of mystery and consequent ambiguity about the personal lives of the three major Beguines: Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Marguerite. But it is the French mystic who draws the most disagreement. The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to find certitude, for that is impossible; rather, it is to reveal the nature of her work that brought down the condemnation of the Inquisition upon her. The essential teaching of *The Mirror* is thus the most critical and appropriate to this research. Marguerite, along with Hadewijch and Mechthild, blazed a trail which the institutional Church barred others from following. What was it that made authority figures so discombobulated?

The majority of present knowledge about Marguerite is based on the documents of her trial and studies of her book. What most scholars agree upon is

- that a Frenchwoman, Marguerite Porete, wrote *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and Those Who Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love* and …
- that she took on the life of a Beguine in some form, either as a traveling mendicant or as a leader in a Beguine community, or perhaps both in sequence;
- that she was supported by some clergy and theologians who came to her defense;
- that her mysticism was apophatic and therefore quite incomprehensible to many;
- that she spoke up against Church officials without fear of reprisal;

[54]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 244.

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- that she was brought to trial by the Inquisition and sentenced to death as a heretic;
- that she did not speak during her imprisonment and even to her death;
- and that the high level of her articulation speaks of a very solid education and so she must have belonged to the upper class of society.

In her writing, she says that some Beguines were also attacking her. McGinn is of the opinion that Marguerite was probably referring to Beguines who were "enclosed" (cloistered) and who were very uneasy with her mendicant and wandering style of life.

Marguerite's book was first published in 1290. Her inquisitors condemned the book probably between 1296 and 1306, and she was forced to witness the burning of her book in front of Bishop Guy II of Cambrai. In 1308, however, she was arrested for continuing to distribute the text. The Dominican Inquisitor of Paris, William Hubert, called in twenty-one theologians to study fifteen of her propositions that were said to be heretical. She was brought before the tribunal but she refused to speak. She was accused, among other things, of "quietism," i.e., "indifference to the ecclesiastically mediated means of salvation."[55] Marguerite continued to remain silent and refused to recant. Thus, in 1310, she was burned at the stake and her book with her. But that was not the end, for her influence continued.

Among the mystical texts written in the vernacular in the Middle Ages, *The Mirror* was one of the most disseminated and most controversial texts of its time. In fact, a strong case can be made that it influenced and was used by the apophatic theologian Meister Echkart. *The Mirror* is not a book about Marguerite's visions. Also, she does not apologize or try to make excuses for being a woman—in point of fact, she takes a different approach from her contemporaries. So why the controversy and why did it provoke conflict?

[55]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 245.

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The teachings that follow make up the essence of what Marguerite preached. She was caught in the middle of the struggle between the mystical and the institutional elements of Christianity, a tug-of-war that is felt to the present day. On one hand, it is the nature of institutions to set up organizing categories and definitions under which they function. Anything that radically opposes those categories is seen as a threat to the institutions' foundations. On the other hand, mysticism is innately about encounters, dialogues, the expanding of boundaries, and the melding of horizons in order to sift-out the pure essence of humanity's relationship with the Godhead. Mysticism is organic. It dwells in those who live it. Thus, it cannot be confined to dogmatic statements.

The Mirror creates a dialogue between personifications of the "Church," "Reason," "Love," "Truth," etc. God, too, is personified. Its central theme is annihilation, a mysticism that believes, like Mechthild, in pre-creative existence, where the soul must return to its source and "in this transition everything disappears." Marguerite sees this as the sixth and final stage of the soul; in this end of annihilation, everything no longer exists but is "into primordial Oneness with God."[56] In the words of Marguerite:

> Now this soul is in the stage of the first being, which is her being, and she has left behind three and has made of two one. But what is this one? This one is when the soul is placed again in the simple Godhead, who is one simple being of overflowing fruition, in fullness of knowledge, without feeling, above all thought.[57]

In her book, Marguerite pitted "Holy Church the Little" against "Holy Church the Great," as she called them. Here, "Reason" is the opponent of "Love." She confirms that "the ultimate meaning of Love is annihilation."[58] Marguerite thus confronts the institutional Church

[56]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 251.

[57]Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 118.

[58]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 250.

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and its "clergy as 'Reason's' servants, who are representative of those who will never be able to grasp the message that Love teaches the Simple Soul."[59] The book also has harsh yet truthful words for the "Sad Souls" who remain in the land of will and desire. They are not totally annihilated and are therefore not totally in God. They are, in Marguerite's terminology, at the fifth stage of annihilation and have not crossed over to the last stage. However, "Love" insists, through Marguerite, that "even the crass merchant souls who do nothing more than fulfill commandments, as well as the Lost and Sad Souls who have attained higher stages of love without reaching freedom, they will be saved."[60] She probably admits this not to contradict the doctrine of "Holy Church the Little," where "Reason" rules.

Marguerite speaks of "works-salvation" versus "free-salvation" which comes from faith alone. This proposition put her in deep heretical water with the Inquisition. Within her apophatic spirituality, she called God "Far Nigh." God is absently present in his "Far Nearness." Like John of the Cross a century later, "nothingness" is absolutely central to her teachings. The "Soul" says:

> Oh, Love, says this Soul, the meaning of what is said makes me nothing, and the nothingness of this alone has placed me in an abyss, below less than nothing … And the knowledge of my nothingness … has given me the all, and the nothingness of this all … has taken litany and prayer from me, so that I pray nothing.[61]

The Mirror has brought Marguerite to the state of annihilation where she desires to remain in her nothingness as she states:

> The opening of this book has made me see so clearly that it made me give back what is his and receive what is mine—that is, that he is … and I am not, and so it is indeed right that I do not possess myself. And the light of the opening of this book has made me find what is mine and to remain in it. Thus I have only as much being as he is able

[59]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 251.

[60]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 252.

[61]Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 108.

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> to be of himself in me. Thus, what is right has rightly restored what is mine to me and nakedly shown that I do not exist.[62]

We Can Walk through the Portal in the 21st Century

Perhaps it is time to bring back the mystical images and bold practices of the Beguines. Since the Age of the Enlightenment, Christian spirituality has become too intellectual, rationally defining our beliefs in so many theological frameworks. Perhaps we were shifting away from emotionally-driven devotions to the crucified Christ and the Mater Dolorosa so theologians moved to the intellect. The three Beguine mystics opened a portal which we can now walk through that is neither emotional nor intellectual.

Today we can look to the language of experimental science. Is it time to bring back to our spiritual life the essence of the Beguine spirituality and movement especially as exemplified by Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Marguerite? Maybe we are to explore, to have the audacity to abandon our inner life to chaos? Do we not need expression in movement and play in order to prepare us to fall into the consciousness of being … one that has respect for all living things and an appreciation for all the different cultures of the world? Within this three-dimensional world, what can we gain by giving free expression to bolder ways that are more inclusive of other religious approaches to the development of our inner life? Do we not need an all-encompassing spirituality in the 21st century?

In the onslaught of the digital age, where are people going with their spirituality in terms of how they want to practice their faith, prayer, service, and relationships in marriage? This clearly requires a great deal of research that is culture-based. But while there is a need to get hard data in order to be prescriptive, that is not the objective of this article. Looking at the lives of the three major Beguine mystics,

[62]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 251.

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however, what do we see? Here are some markers that they can offer us in the 21st century which might throw some light on three areas: their free personal response, their confrontation with social and religious norms, and their daring in their contemplative life.

First, the Beguines were women who simply went out and did what they needed to do in order to fulfill what they believed was right for them. The three major mystics were among the bravest. The Beguines did not wait for a leader and neither did they join a movement, yet they sprung spontaneously in many different places. There is no solid evidence that the three even read the others' works. No one rallied or called them to action; rather, they listened to their inner forces and acted on them. Yes, there was chaos in the process, but there was also a great deal of innovation and creativity that created a new mysticism for their age, one that could draw from emotion and intellectual theological ideas and then leave both behind to go to the "unknowing," the "unfaith," and the "nothingness."

Second, they were alert to their times but they were not afraid to go against the hierarchy, even if it meant being arrested and condemned to death. Fear did not dominate their actions, drawn as they were from the inner fire which the three mystics felt in the practice of meditation and in their good works. Yes, they were aware of the plight of those around them, and that is why they dedicated much of their energy towards helping the unfortunate. But they were not activists who simply responded to external circumstances, for it seemed that they were driven by their interior life in the face of the Godhead.

Third, they were not afraid of making society feel uncomfortable. They went against social norms and were willing to stand against the institutional Church. They went back to the Gospels and made the norms of Jesus their standard. For women today, the three Beguines opened wide the portal for the institutional Church to change its attitude toward women in general. Perhaps it is time for a new movement, one that is neither organized nor structured, where each woman in her own environment can take a stand no matter what the odds, just as the Beguines did. Whether it is about women being ordained as Catholic priests, or being given a greater role and more

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authority in the structure and leadership of the institutional Church—is it time for women to insist?

Fourth, they were not afraid to allow the physical elements of their bodies to enter into their interaction with God. The concept of "minne"/love is an approach that might cause some reservation because there is a fear of delving into affectivity in our highly rational society. Our intellectual approach is just as detrimental as the overly indulgent emotional approach. Mechthild, therefore, talked of "play" and the "game of love" when speaking about her relationship with the Godhead; all three spoke of their interaction with the Godhead/Trinity in sexual and erotic terms, and did so without embarrassment. They seemed to have brought this notion into their contemplation.

Fifth, they were daring in their understanding of the spiritual stages, which included notions such as "unfaith," "estrangement," and "annihilation." Their entrance into the pathway of "nothingness" came before John of the Cross would discuss "nada" (nothing). Of course, there were mystics of the early Church who spoke in the language of their times, but these women were unashamed of the disturbance the use of these words might cause in their milieu. From the eroticism of their passion and love which they saw as an initial stage of interaction with the Godhead, they knew that they would be "sinking," as Mechthild describes it, into the "unfaith" of Hadewijch, into the abyss of "nothingness" where everything, in the terms of Marguerite Porete, is destroyed, where there is no mind, no emotion, no will, and no desire. We "disappear" into the Being of the Godhead.

Such words were provocative in their era. Today, however, with our deeper understanding of later mystics and of the avatars of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism, their language is most appropriate. In this sense, they open the portal of oneness with all religions and beliefs.

In the Middle Ages, the three great Beguine mystics were condemned and their works buried by the Church. Hadewijch was exiled from society, Mechtild bent to the male authorities of the Church and withdrew to a monastery, and Maguerite was executed by fire as a heretic by the Church. It has been a long time coming—800 years, but the winds have shifted. The lifestyle of the Beguines is ripe for

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the 21st century. Perhaps the three Beguines might say to us today, using the words of Mechthild in her noted poem on the mystical life and works of love:

> You should love the nothing,
> You should flee the something,
> You should stand alone,
> You should go to no one.
> You should not be too busy
> And you should be free of all things.
> You should unbind the captives
> And compel the free. (FL 1:35)[63]

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[63]McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 243.

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