


BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Mysticism and scholasticism

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Abstract

This article offers some reflections on Christina Van Dyke's *Hidden Wisdom*, using the opportunity to make some suggestions as to possible lines of influence between the world of scholastic theology and that of the female medieval mystics in what Van Dyke considers their 'annihilationist' mode: that the goal of the spiritual life is transformation into God in some sense.

Christina Van Dyke's wonderful book, *Hidden Wisdom* (Van Dyke (2022)), opens, in short compass, a whole new world – new to me at least, and I suspect to many of its readers. Van Dyke offers a serious discussion of the ways in which five philosophical questions were treated in medieval female mysticism: self-knowledge, the nature of reason, the nature of the will, the nature of persons, and the afterlife. The results are illuminating, revealing deep and original philosophical insights, not necessarily developed systematically but nevertheless rich and suggestive.

Van Dyke divides her terrain into two basic domains: those writers (or, sometimes, speakers) whose conception of the spiritual life is essentially one of self-abnegation or annihilation; and those whose conception of the spiritual life is robustly one of enhanced physical experience: of a kind of transcendent physical *life*, in short, the polar opposite of the first domain.

That there is material of interest to the historian of mystical theory and practice to be found in the work of the authors Van Dyke discusses is perhaps no surprise; but that there is material of interest to the historian of philosophy more generally is very gratifying indeed. Of course, I have just set up something of a false dichotomy. Mystical theology is as much part of the theological discipline as its more systematic sibling, and it is quite right that the two should inform each other; and quite right that the two should turn out perhaps simply to be the same thing, differently inflected, perhaps, but belonging to the same world.

Here, I would like to explore this identity a little more deeply, by looking at processes of cross-fertilization: ways in which some of the authors Van Dyke discusses influenced their scholastic contemporaries, and ways in which some of these scholastic theologians influenced the female mystics. Indeed, at relevant points in the book, Van Dyke engages with the scholastic tradition. But the occasions are few and far between, and one question I had when I read the book was whether there might be more material to be excavated here. Much remains veiled in mystery. How it might be that the two intellectual streams accessed each other is something for which we have little direct evidence,

for example, though it is possible in some cases to offer plausible speculations. (We have some evidence, particularly in cases in which a mystic fell foul of ecclesiastical (i.e. scholastic) authority (see for example King (2018)). Doubtless more could be found with further attentive research.)

In what follows, I shall discuss two ways in which the scholastic theologian Henry of Ghent (d. 1293) is relevant to the story of medieval mysticism: one in which he seems to have learned from a female mystic (Marguerite Porete, or the Belgian Beguines more generally); and one in which he seems to have influenced one (Angela of Foligno). Henry himself is a very significant figure. He was the most important and systematic critic of the thought of Thomas Aquinas in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. And he was the theologian who most attracted Duns Scotus's critical attention in the first few years of the fourteenth century. It perhaps goes without saying that his thought is interesting in its own right, quite apart from the pivotal role he played in the development of medieval theology and philosophy. The scholastic whom Marguerite most famously influenced was of course Meister Eckhart. But he is something of an exceptional case, and a very atypical scholastic theologian. Henry is a far more mainline figure in the history of scholasticism.

Marguerite Porete is an example of Van Dyke's annihilationist mystics: the self is lost or absorbed in the divine. Here are some characteristic passages, one of them discussed by Van Dyke (2022, 185–186). First, from chapter 82 of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*:

As long as she is in the Being by which God makes her to be, there where she has given her will, and thus cannot will except the will of the One who has transformed her of Himself for her sake into His goodness. And if she is thus unencumbered in all aspects, she loses her name, for she rises in sovereignty. And therefore she loses her name in the One in whom she is melted and dissolved through Himself and in Himself. Thus she would be like a body of water which flows from the sea, which has some name, as one would be able to say Aisne or Seine or another river. And when this water or river returns into the sea, it loses its course and its name . . . Likewise it is with this Soul. (Porete (1993), 158)

Here we see the typical tension in such accounts: the soul both is (in virtue of identity with the divine) and is not (in virtue of that same identity). But note the images: 'melted', 'dissolved', 'transformed into [divine] goodness'; she 'loses her name' (that is, her identity); she 'flows from the sea . . . [and] returns into the sea'. (The image of God as the sea perhaps derives from John of Damascus's 'infinite sea of essence': see *Expositio fidei*, ch. 9 (John of Damascus (1958), 189).)

This liminal identity has not only an ontological component; it has an epistemic one too, with the soul's knowledge just as ambiguous as the soul's identity, and in a corresponding way. Thus, in chapter 91:

[The soul] has fallen from Love into Nothingness, and from Nothingness into illumination by God, who sees Himself with the eyes of his majesty, who in this point has illuminated her with Himself. And she is so dissolved in Him that she sees neither herself nor Him, and thus He sees completely himself alone, by His divine goodness. (Porete (1993), 167, altered)

Here the soul sees nothing, and is incapable of discerning the difference between God and herself; God sees Godself, and in doing so there is nothing else left to discern.

We see something similar in Marguerite's account of the sixth stage of the soul's ascent to God, found in chapter 118:

The sixth stage is that the Soul does not see herself on account of such an abyss of humility which she has within her. Nor does she see God on account of the highest goodness which He has. But God sees Himself in her by His divine majesty, who illuminates this Soul with Himself, so that she sees only that there is nothing except God Himself Who is, and from whom all things are. And He who is, is God Himself. And thus she does not see according to herself, for whoever sees the One who is does not see except God Himself, now sees Himself in this same soul by His divine majesty . . . But this Soul, thus pure and illuminated, sees neither God nor herself, but God sees Himself of Himself in her, for her, without her. God show to her that there is nothing except Him. (*ibid.*, 193, altered)

Again, there is a blurring of boundaries: the soul is; but there is nothing other than God. Accordingly, the only cognizer here is God; God knows Godself, and in doing so, since God is both *in* the soul and identified with the soul, God knows the soul too. (The seventh and final stage – complete beatific union – is unknown, and Marguerite says nothing about it: ‘of which none know how to speak’ (*ibid.*); ‘the seventh stage Love keeps within itself’ (*ibid.*, 194).)

Now, I doubt that Henry knew Marguerite’s work directly. But it seems reasonable to suppose that what Marguerite wrote reflected more general beliefs and practices within the Beguinages. And, as Archdeacon of Tournai, Henry was plumb in the middle, geographically, of the Beguine movement. Indeed, it is striking how similar Henry’s own language about beatific union is to all this. The *locus classicus* is Henry’s *Quodlibet* XIII, question 12. (For a full discussion, see Cross (2019).) Henry talks of God’s beatific presence in the soul in terms of the soul’s conversion into God:

I say that true human beatitude consists . . . more principally in the object that is uncreated beatitude that is God, to the extent that he is the good of the will, in whom, through the created will’s act of beatitude, the human will transforms itself, so that it is converted into that [object] as far as is possible according to nature. (Henry of Ghent (1979–), XVIII, 135)

Here we have the soul ‘converted’ into God ‘as far as is possible’. But the passage gives the impression – quite contrary to that implied by Marguerite – that this is the work of the soul ‘transform[ing] itself’.

This, I think, is not however quite what Henry means. A little later, he makes it plain that the transformation is effected by God, indwelling the soul:

That [the soul] goes out of itself and begins to be what it loves cannot be done other than through perichoresis (*circumincessionem*) – not of the soul interpenetrating (*illabentis*) the deity, but rather vice versa, of the deity interpenetrating the soul . . . Just as iron placed in fire glows and, like fire, is made hot and bright, as the fire buries itself in the iron and penetrates its interior, rather than vice versa (the iron burying itself in the fire and penetrating its interior). (*ibid.*, 136)

To be sure, the images here are much more conventional and traditional than Marguerite’s. And the soul’s becoming God is now glossed in terms merely of total perichoresis. But the only point I wish to focus on here is that the action is something done to the soul, not something that it does.

So taking these two passages together we might think Henry’s view to be that the soul becomes identical with God (‘as far as is possible according to nature’), and that this is something done to the soul by God. In a further passage, Henry confirms all this, and

brings in as well the epistemic claim that the soul cannot experience itself as anything other than God:

By this perichoresis of the deity . . . into the substance of the soul, the soul itself, illuminated by uncreated light, shines, and, inflamed by the fire of [uncreated] charity, burns; and through this has deformity and likeness [to God] to the extent that this is possible, so that, as it were (*quasi*), it neither is nor appears to be other than God, or an essence distinct from [God], just as iron glowing in fire shines and burns like fire, and, as it were, neither is nor appears to be other than fire, or a distinct essence from it. (*ibid.*)

Here Henry, like Marguerite, claims that the 'illuminated' soul has deformity, such that it is not 'other than God', or an 'essence distinct from' God; and does not appear to be 'other than God', or 'an essence distinct from' God. Nothing here suggests that the phenomenal or cognitive component here is not fully general: God sees Godself, and does not see the soul distinct from God; and the soul sees God, and does not see the soul distinct from God.

It seems highly plausible that there are some lines of influence here. But they seem clearly one-way: from the Beguine to Henry. The carefully theorized account of a seven-fold progression of the spiritual life found in Marguerite is wholly ignored by Henry, and Henry uses the insights merely as a way of conceptualizing beatific union itself: the stage of the spiritual journey *after* the one that Marguerite describes in such detail. And as a university theologian, Henry clearly saw the prudent requirement to include manifold qualifications in what Marguerite left unqualified (hence the presence of 'quasi' at various points in the discussion, and 'as far as is possible').

One general point of commonality is worth noting, too: the emphasis on the will over reason and the intellect, doubtless found in both authors as a consequence of the burgeoning affective spirituality found in both scholastic and non-scholastic Franciscan circles. But tracing the various influences, again, is work for another time.

My second example seems to go the other way: we know that Henry's work predates the *Instructions* of Angela of Foligno. But Henry elsewhere in his *oeuvre* makes use of a very striking image for mystical union that is well-known not because of its use in Henry but because of its use in Angela. How it may have made its way from the one to the other – and it is of course not possible to rule out the thought that both came up with it independently – is something about which I have no information.

Here is how it appears in Angela, in reference to the purification of the souls of her dead sons:

My sons seem to be so transformed in God that it is as if I see nothing but God in them, in both his glorified and suffering state, as if God had totally transubstantiated and absorbed them into the unfathomable depths of his life. (Angela of Foligno (1992), 249)

Here we have absorption metaphors and annihilation metaphors (transubstantiation; akin to Henry's conversion in the texts discussed above). And, as with both Marguerite and Henry, the sons seem to be recognizable merely as God.

The transubstantiation language is found rather earlier on in Henry, in his *Summa quaestionum*, q. 49 – and this is perhaps its origin, as I have just suggested. Here is what Henry says: 'the will unites itself [to God] . . . as to the goal and the good, as it were (*quasi*) by transubstantiating, or transforming or converting, itself by its act, through the power of love, into [the goal]' (*Summa quaestionum*, q. 49, a. 6 (Henry of Ghent (1979–), XXX, 138)). The result of this act is, again, 'identity with the ultimate goal'

(*ibid.*). Elsewhere, Henry claims without qualification that ‘the willer is transubstantiated’ into the goal (*Summa quaestionum*, q. 49, a. 5 (Henry of Ghent (1979–), XXX, 98)). Clearly there are differences from Angela. Yet again, there is a contrast in the relevant agency: God, I assume, in Angela, and the created will in Henry. One reason for this is that the issue Henry is addressing is the relative degree of union achieved by acts of cognition and appetite: greater in the latter case, according to Henry. So the dialectic perhaps constrains him to think in terms of the activity of intellect and will, not the divine activity in those powers. But still, the similarities seem to me more striking than the differences.

I mentioned above the need for further research into all this. I end by reiterating this plea. Many of us – myself included – have imagined a great barrier between the two fields of study that I have just been talking about. But there is no such barrier, and we need to continue to find ways of showing this, integrating mystical and dogmatic theology into one, and valuing the equal but different contributions of both male and female writers in the Middle Ages.

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