

# Mystics of the Church

## 12th & 13th Century Women Mystics

1

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) stands alone among women mystics of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Medievalists debate whether she merits the mystic tag. Some prefer to classify her as a prophetess, and she was known as “the Sibyll of the Rhine.” There is enough evidence of her experience of Presence, however, to assign her a place among the mystics in line with criteria used by Bernard McGinn, so that I will include her. Women mystics clearly came into prominence in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the Beguines. The Beguines combined contemplation with lives devoted to apostolic activities such as charity and even preaching. Mary of Oignies (1176-1213) was among the earliest of these. We do not learn about her from her own writings but from accounts written by clergy friends. Later Beguines, beginning with Beatrice of Nazareth (1200-1268), wrote prolifically.

2

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- I. Hildegard of Bingen
  - Hildegard represented both *Wesenmystik* and *Brautmystik* views.
  - A. Life
    - Hildegard was born of noble family at Böckelheim on the River Nahe, but she was reared by Blessed Jutta, a recluse who had a cell on the adjacent Diessenberg. Around 1116 Hildegard joined a Benedictine community that gathered around Jutta. In 1136 she succeeded Jutta as abbess. Under direction of her confessor she began to record some of her visions. With approval of the Archbishop of Mainz she dictated her *Scivias* between 1141 and 1151. In the meantime in 1147 Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153), under influence of Bernard of Clairvaux, gave guarded approval of her visions. Between 1147 and 1152 she moved her community to Rupertsberg, near Bingen, where a large convent was built. Thereafter she traveled extensively throughout the Rhineland. In 1165 she established a daughter house at Eibingen, near

3

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- Rudesheim. She evidently exerted a wide influence during her lifetime. Her correspondents included the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and various kings, prelates, and saints. Although she was credited with miracles already during her lifetime, efforts to secure her canonization failed until the 15<sup>th</sup> century.
- B. Writings
  - Hildegard's writings reflect a strong prophetic strain. In her *Scivias*, "Know the Ways" or "You Know the Ways," she, among other things, denounced the vices of the world and issued enigmatic predictions of disaster. Many letters did the same. She demonstrated unusual scientific acumen for her day in a book on the operation of nature and another on medicine. Evidence again of her wide learning, her theological works included an *Explication of the Athanasian Creed*, an *Exposition of the Gospels*, and an *Exposition of the Rule of Saint Benedict*. She compiled a *Book of the Merits of Life* and composed various songs for her nuns.

4

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – C. Thought

- 1. Although Caroline Bynum declared that “Hildegard was not, technically speaking, a mystic at all” (“Preface” in *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, Classics of Western Spirituality, 2-3.), Peter Dronke insisted that “She is clearly of mystical disposition—her sense of the divine presence is the lodestar of her life.” (*Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 200.) McGinn thinks these views not as contradictory as they seem; there is evidence for both sides. Hildegard was not reluctant to talk about her experiences in support of her authority. McGinn quotes this statement in a letter she wrote in 1175 to Guibert of Gembloux:

5

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

– Since my infancy, however, when I was not yet strong in my bones and nerves and veins, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even till now, when I am more than seventy years old. And as God wills, in this vision my spirit mounts upwards, into the height of the firmament and into changing air and dilates itself among different nations, even though they are in far-off regions and places remote from me. And because I see these things in such a manner, for this reason I also behold them in changing forms of clouds and other created things. But I hear them not with my physical ears, nor with my heart’s thoughts, nor do I perceive them by bringing any of my five senses to bear—but only in my soul, my physical eyes open, so that I never suffer their failing in loss of consciousness (*ecstasis*); no, I see these things wakefully, day and night. And I am constantly oppressed by illnesses, and so enmeshed in intense pains that they threaten to bring on my death; but so far God has stayed me.

6

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- 2. Note that her visions do not involve dream states or take place in rapture. Her experience was unusual. The same distinctive character appears in her discrimination of two forms of seeing based on two kinds of light:
  - The brightness (*lumen*) that I see is not spatial, yet it is far, far more lucent than a cloud that envelops the sun. I cannot contemplate height or length or breadth in it; and I call it “the shadow of the living brightness” (*umbra viventis lucis*). And as sun, moon, and stars appear mirrored in water, so scriptures, discourses, virtues, and some works of men take form for me and are reflected radiant in this brightness. . . . And the things I write are those I see and hear through the vision, sparkling nor do I set down words other than those I hear. . . . And the words that I see and hear through the vision are not like words that come from human lips, but like a flame and a cloud moved in pure air.

7

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- And in that same brightness I sometimes, not often, see another light, which I call “the living light” (*lux vivens*); when and how I see it, I cannot express; and for the time I do see it, all sadness and all anguish is taken from me, so that then I have the air of an innocent young girl and not of a little old woman. (McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 334-335.)
- 3. To the usual understanding of *visio* as referring both to the experience of seeing and the content seen, Hildegard seems to add a capacity of her soul. “Hildegard receives a message from God in the images she sees reflected in this light, but it does not seem that the *umbra viventis lucis* involves direct experience of God in the mystical sense.” (McGinn, 335.) The way she talks about the *lux vivens*, however, as well as other aspects of her visions, suggests that “she is talking about an immediate contact with the divine source of the *umbra viventis lucis*.” (McGinn, 336.)

8

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- 4. McGinn also found two other passages in Hildegard that puts her closer to the mystical tradition. During one experience in 1167, she passed beyond consciousness into ecstasy or rapture:
  - At last in the time that followed I saw a mystic and wondrous vision, such that all my womb was convulsed and my body's sensory powers were extinguished, because my knowledge was transmitted into another mode, as if I no longer knew myself. And from God's inspiration as it were drops of gentle rain splashed into the knowledge of my mind, just as the Holy Spirit permeated John the Evangelist when he sucked supremely deep revelation from the breast of Jesus. (McGinn, 336.)
- This comes the closest to erotic language of any passage found in Hildegard. McGinn concludes that, although Hildegard's writings are not mystical in character, the evidence some visions give would make it difficult to deny them characterization as mystical by the standards he uses. He does not, however, extend that judgment to Elizabeth of Schönau, a contemporary of Hildegard often linked with her.

9

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- II. Mary of Oignies
  - Around 1200 Europe entered into a new phase of its history. Significant changes occurred in politics, economics, and education that brought about a new mysticism. Emphasis on "apostolic life" shoved aside the preference for the medieval cloister. Evangelical understanding of "apostolic life" majored on penance, poverty, and preaching as evidenced in Peter Waldo and subsequently in Francis and Dominic. The new mysticism entailed: (1) new attitudes toward the relationship between world and cloister; (2) a new relationship between men and women on the mystical path; and (3) new forms of language and modes of representation of mystical consciousness. (McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 12.)

10

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- The Beguine movement began in Lotharingia (Belgium) and went through four phases: (1) individual women living alone or with their parents, (2) small communities in a parish setting, (3) larger groups of enclosed Beguines in the service of hospitals and other good works, and (4) independent Beguine parishes with large communities of women and associated personnel. Beguines still exist today in Belgium.

11

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – A. Life

- Mary was born of wealthy parents in Nivelles in the diocese of Liège. She was married at age fourteen, but she persuaded her husband to take a vow of chastity soon afterwards and to undertake a life of apostolic activity rather than join a monastery. Like Francis of Assisi, Mary and her spouse devoted themselves to the care of lepers near Nivelles at Williambrouck. Mary remained there for several years until, around 1207, her growing reputation for sanctity attracted like-minded women to come and live with her. Unable to bear the press of people around her, she fled to the house of Augustinian Canons at the church of St. Nicholas at Oignies. There she traveled about visiting the sick and dying. Both at Williambrouck and at Oignies she was the center of a group of holy women and educated clergy who looked on her as a model of “apostolic life.” For her the most important of these was James of Vitry, who came from Paris around 1208 to meet Mary at Oignies. With her encouragement he presented himself for ordination

12

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- about 1210. He returned to the community in Oignies in 1211. At about the same time Archbishop of Toulouse Fulk came to Liège. He subsequently made an important contribution to shaping the new mysticism. According to the Prologue of James of Vitry's *Life of Mary of Oignies*, he "came as far as the diocese of Liège, drawn, as it were, by the odor and fame of certain people fighting for God in true humility. He did not cease to admire their faith and devotion, especially the holy women who with the greatest desire and reverence venerated Christ's church and the church's sacraments which in his own territory were either totally rejected or underappreciated by almost everybody." (McGinn, *Flowering*, 35.) Mary died in June, 1213. James of Vitry immediately began writing a life and finished it by the time he was named Archbishop of Acre in the Holy Land in 1216.

13

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- B. *The Life of Mary of Oignies* by James of Vitry
  - 1. James of Vitry used the life of Mary of Oignies in part to fight the heretical Cathari in southern France against whom Innocent III declared a crusade in 1208. Curiously the Beguines themselves fell under suspicion of heresy even as they were being invoked in the fight against heresy!
  - 2. James portrays Mary as a new kind of mystic—as apostolic as she was ecstatic. Mary practiced compunction, fasting, prayer, humility, chastity, and especially penance, but she also performed miracles and made miraculous prophecies. Like some later Beguines, she went to extremes with her asceticism, e.g., cutting off a piece of her flesh. She had frequent visions of angels and saints, the devil, and the departed. James described her as having a special love

14

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- for the Eucharist, once surviving for 35 days on the sacrament alone! In a most remarkable account, unlike always brief experiences of Presence described by Augustine, Gregory the Great, or Bernard of Clairvaux, she remained in ecstasy all the time.
  - Once she rested sweetly with the Lord for thirty-five days in a sweet and blessed silence, taking no corporeal food and totally unable to speak a word for days save for “I want the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” When she received it, she remained in her silence with the Lord for whole days. In those days she used to feel as if her spirit were separated from her body. . . . Thus she was drawn away from sensible objects and rapt above herself in an ecstasy (*excessus*). Finally, after five weeks she returned to herself, opened her mouth, and to the wonder of those about her spoke and received corporeal food. (*Life of Mary of Oignies* 1.8.25; McGinn, *Flowering*, 37.)

15

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- 2. McGinn noted that the *Life* contains about a dozen passages like this. McGinn added, “James seems less interested in showing how Mary fits into the traditional hierarchy of visions than in presenting a new model of contact with God, one that concentrates on visual representation and intense somatic effects that witness to the saint’s immediate experience of God.” (Ibid. 38.) James never questioned Mary’s visionary experiences. As he depicted them, they increased in intensity near the end of her life. He also recorded her outbursts of song and spontaneous praise as the end of life loomed. He characterized her as both teacher and preacher.

16



## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- III. Beatrice of Nazareth
  - Up to this point most depictions of women's spiritual experiences came from the hands of men. Beatrice seems to have been the first female author of the new mysticism.
  - A. Life
    - Thanks to a journal Beatrice kept, we know more about her than we do about most Beguines. She was born into a wealthy middle-class family near Leuven in 1200. Described as a prodigy, she was educated by Beguines but became an oblate at the Cistercian convent at Bloemendaal around 1210. She professed herself as a Cistercian nun in 1216 and was sent to the convent of Rameya to learn the art of writing liturgical manuscripts. There she formed a close friendship with Ida of Nivelles. Her first mystical experience occurred in January of 1217. She returned to Bloemendaal and remained for several years. She then moved to another Cistercian convent at Magdendaal. In May of 1536 she transferred to the new Cistercian convent of Nazareth at Lieer funded by her father, where she became prioress. She remained there until her death in 1268.

17

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- B. Writings
  - Only one of Beatrice's extensive writings has survived, a work entitled *The Seven Manners of Loving*. An anonymous author wrote her *Life*, based on the lost spiritual journal she kept.
- C. Mystical Thought
  - In *The Seven Manners of Loving* Beatrice sought to guide others along the path of interior transformation toward direct contact with God. The work explores powerfully the power of *minne/fin'amour*, the central concern of the women mystics of northern Europe. At that time *minne* had numerous nuances: courtly love, violent love, as designation for God. McGinn has noted that "it is perhaps most essentially a form of relational consciousness seeking to find expression." (*Flowering*, 171.) The "seven

18

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- manners” are as follows: (1) an “active” longing that drives the soul to regain the “purity, nobility, and freedom” in which it was created (4.21-22); (2) the totally disinterested nature of the love of the “maiden who serves her master” (8.7); (3) the torture of *minne* in which the soul cannot satisfy her desire to serve God perfectly because of her created status (10.17-21); (4) the overwhelming delight, freedom, and sweetness that the soul experiences when “it feels all the senses sanctified in love, its will turned into love and is so deeply immersed and absorbed in the abyss of love that it is made wholly into love” (4.21-26); (5) a heightened sense of passion and madness in which “love is vehemently excited and rises like a storm with a great uproar and a great frenzy” (5.2-5), along with resting “in the sweet embrace of love” (5.12-23), which gives the soul such great strength

19

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- of spirit and body that it seems that it can do anything; (6) where “the Lord’s bride” advances to “another manner of loving in a more exalted form of being and in higher understanding” (6.4-5); and (7) wherein the soul is drawn “into the eternity of *minne* and the incomprehensibility and the vastness and the inaccessible sublimity and the deep abyss of the Godhead, which is all in all things, and remains incomprehensible in all things, and which is immutable, all-existent, all-capable, all-comprehending, and all-powerfully working” (7.8-14). Beatrice was the first to use the term Abyss of God, a half century before Jacopone da Todi and Angela of Foligno!

20

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- IV. Hadewijch of Antwerp
  - The Beguines brought the *Brautmystik* tradition to its peak. Building on foundations laid down by the Cistercians, especially Bernard of Clairvaux, they used sensuous imagery to depict the love affair they cultivated with God. Among the most brilliant of the Beguines were Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete, burned at the stake on charges of heresy on June 1, 1310. Each of the three gave much attention to the themes characterizing the “new mysticism” of the 13<sup>th</sup> century: the problem of authority, the role of visions, the relation of soul and body in consciousness of God, the excess of love, and the annihilation that leads to indistinct union with God. They also used the “courtly mode” of mystical language. As McGinn has pointed out, many ideas they articulated for the first time influenced the thought of later mystics such as Meister Eckhart.

21

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- A. Life
  - Hadewijch did not receive a lot of attention until recently. In recent years, however, her writings have begun to undergo intense examination for their contribution to the new mysticism of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. We cannot establish any definite dates for Hadewijch’s life, but she lived during the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, probably near Antwerp. Her learning and knowledge of French courtly poetry suggest that she came from a noble family. In her *Letters* she indicated that she had headed a Beguine house but had experienced opposition that drove her to a vagabond life (29).

22

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – B. Writings

- Hadewijch's writings were not widely circulated in her day and do not seem to have been put into a collection until the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, despite the fact that her literary mastery surpasses that of any other medieval woman mystic. Her works included: 45 *Poems in Stanzas*, 16 *Poems in Couplets*, a *Book of Visions*, and 30 *Letters*. The *Poems in Stanzas*, modeled on the songs of northern French troubadours, transposed motifs of secular love poetry into mystical discourse. In *Poems in Couplets* Hadewijch assumed a more direct and didactic manner. In the *Book of Visions* she arranged her visions in the form of a mystical itinerary. Her visions parallel those of the Book of Revelation. In her *Letters* she was didactic in much the same way as the Apostle Paul.

23

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – C. Mystical Thought

- McGinn has organized Hadewijch's thought under three headings: (1) the nature and activity of *minne*, (2) the relation of God and the soul in *minne*, and (3) the exemplary role of Jesus in living true *minne*.
- 1. Hadewijch said, "*Minne* is everything!" (*Letter* 25.39), and it was for her. *Minne* is indescribable and indefinable. As she said in a poem,
  - The power which I come to know in the nature of *minne*
  - Throws my mind into bewilderment:
  - The thing has no form, no manner, no outward appearance.
  - Yet it can be tasted as something actual:
  - It is the substance of my joy. . . . (*Poems in Stanzas* 22.15-19)

24

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- Though mysterious, *minne* is absolutely essential for Hadewijch, the very meaning of existence. In many passages, following I John 4:16, she identifies *minne* with God—sometimes specifically with the Son or with the Holy Spirit. But it is also the power that pervades the created universe. Its fierce strength fascinated her.
  - O powerful, wonderful *minne*,
  - You who can conquer all with wonder!
  - Conquer me, so that I may conquer you,
  - In your unconquered power. (*Poems in Stanzas* 19.52-53.)

25

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- From a human perspective *minne* is both the experience of being overpowered and our response to it, the power of our own activity of loving that brings us to God. Hadewijch gave *minne* seven names, not as an itinerary of seven stages but as an exploration of love's manifestation. She called it a bond or chain, light (enlightened reason), live coal, fire, dew, living spring, and Hell (suffering). Hell is the fruition of love. To belong to the nature of *minne*, we must practice humility.
  - We must wholly forsake love for love;
  - He who forsakes love for love is wise.
  - It is all one whether we die or live:

26

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- To die for love's sake is to have lived enough.
- Alas, love! You have long driven me to extremity;
- But in this very extremity to which you have driven me.
- In her *Book of Visions* Hadewijch related an encounter with divine love appearing as a six-winged seraph and then added a meditation and letter as to how this experience of the madness of love enabled her to conform to the humanity of God. Seeing the face of God was the goal of mystics, and Hadewijch often spoke of seeing the countenance of love as well as seeing the countenance of God. "Countenance" was evidently her particularly potent way of describing the direct presence of God. The final gift of love calls for "unfaith" or "mistrust," Hadewijch insisted in one of her most original ideas. We must *abandon minne* for the sake of *minne*. By ceasing to have faith in love as one remains totally dedicated to love, the soul finally attains the maturity of true love. She declared,

27

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- "The denial of love with humility is the highest voice of love" (*Book of Visions* 13.283-284.) Hadewijch's accounts of ecstatic experiences mirrored those of other 13<sup>th</sup> century women mystics, but she went beyond others to picture God sitting on a throne "which was I myself." (*Visions* 14.206-224.) Because united to *minne*, she joined the ranks of the perfected.
- 2. ***The relation of God and the soul in minne: mutual Abyss (afgront)***. Hadewijch taught a version of God and the soul as a mutual abyss. Besides the divine countenance, she imaged God as depth/abyss, the wheel/disk, and the whirlpool. She conceived of four paradoxes in the divine nature, based on the hymn "Alpha et Omega, magne Deus":

28

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- 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.

29

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- The paradoxes lay down the foundation for her exemplaristic view of the relation of the human subject to the three persons of the Trinity. God “pours forth his Unity in Persons” and inclines the persons of the Trinity toward us through four gifts: participation in eternity, our creation in time, the path of recreation or redemption by which the God-Man gives us himself in the Eucharist, and relaxing of time, i.e., waiting for us to embrace God. These gifts supply the foundation for various ways of returning to God’s “inmost reality.” The first gift enables us to penetrate the depths of God in an indescribable way.

30

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- The second enables those who choose it to “apply themselves to *minne* without great woe” (*Letter* 22.166-167.) Those who go to God “by way of Hell,” the Cross, are led “very deep into God, for their great despair leads them above all the ramparts and through all the passageways and into all places where the truth is.” (*Letter* 22.179-182.) Those who go the fourth way, “purgatory,” “consume without being satisfied” (22.212). Hadewijch thought of herself as pursuing the third and fourth ways. Hadewijch claimed that God gave himself to her “both in spiritual understanding of himself and in feeling” (*Visions* 1.334-336). As she fell at God’s feet in her vision, God said, “Stand up! For you are standing in me from all eternity, entirely free and without fall. For you have desired to be one with me.” (*Visions* 1.341-345.) Emphasis on virtual preexistence in God served as part of her idea of the mystic union and had strong roots in Platonism as passed on through Philo, Origen, Augustine, Erigena, and William of St Thierry.

31

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- McGinn has noted that “For Hadewijch it seems to have been central to the claims she made for her writings. When we ask on what authority the beguine advances her rich and unusual theology and directs those under her along the mystical path, her consciousness of speaking out of her precreational self in God provides the central clue.” (*Flowering*, 214.) She did not hesitate to claim total union:
  - And in that very instant, I saw myself received in union by the One who was 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. Then I received the certainty of being received, in this form, in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me. (*Visions* 12.187-192.)

32



## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- Her teaching about deep union is evident also in the way she used the language of the abyss, a word used by Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry. The Cistercians passed it on into the 13<sup>th</sup> century. **Here, though, Hadewijch marked a major turning point in western mysticism. She moved beyond conceiving of a loving union of finite spirit with Infinite Spirit to something like the “union of indistinction” found in Meister Eckhart and other late-13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century mystics.** In Hadewijch this indistinct unity could occur because the preexistent or exemplary self had always enjoyed it in the depths of the Trinity.

33

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- **3. Jesus’ exemplary role in *minne*.** None of the mystics surpassed Hadewijch in the Christological focus of her mysticism. No one can achieve perfection, she insisted, “unless he/she wishes to live God and man” (*Visions* 13.53). “Living God and man” requires us to follow Jesus, especially in suffering. Jesus is our only way to God. For Hadewijch the common human experience of suffering, especially the pain of God’s absence, is integral to true mystical consciousness. Jesus has taken all human life into God save for sin. It is essential for mystical consciousness to recognize God’s presence

34

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- in absence, the realization that joy can be found in suffering, and faith in the midst of “unfaith.” Her focus on suffering as a common human experience led her to understand how following Jesus required responsibility to others. Not sweet feelings but practice of virtue proves true adherence to *minne*. Hadewijch’s letters are full of discussions of the need to serve others in humility and love. She seems to have averted the inquisitors better than Mechthild and Marguerite Porete because she did not criticize the institutional Church as they did.

35

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- V. Mechthild of Magdeburg
  - Mechthild (c. 1208-c. 1282) is remembered especially for devotion to the Sacred Heart that gained great popularity in the next couple of centuries and has exerted much impact on modern Catholic devotion.
  - A. Life
    - Born into a noble family of Saxony, Mechthild experienced visions from about age twelve. She left home around 1230 and became a Beguine at Magdeburg. She led there a life of prayer and penance and probably exercised authority in a Beguine community. In 1272, in poor health, she moved to the Cistercian convent at Helfta.

36

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – B. Writings

- At the order of her Dominican confessor, Henry of Halle, Mechthild wrote down her visions between 1250 and 1269 under the title *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. She added a seventh book when she moved to Helfta. She did not intend the work to remain private. Instead, she envisioned it as a new “vernacular” Bible intended for public reading and discussion. She may not have written the opening directive that “One should receive this book eagerly, for it is God himself who speaks the words,” but she viewed herself as an instrument of God. Male mystics do not seem to have invoked divine authorization for their writings as Mechthild did. The original Low German version has not survived, but it has been conserved in High German and Latin translations.

37

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – C. Mystical Thought

- 1. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* explicitly reveals the Trinity. As the title suggests, the essence of God is “flowing.” Although visions are prominent, the book is not simply a collection of them. McGinn has cited three fundamental strategies she used to get her message across: confession (somewhat like Augustine’s classic), dialogue, and poetry. The whole presents a strong kataphatic form of mysticism, and Mechthild shows little awareness of apophatic theology.
- 2. Three images dominate her understanding of God: flowing, courting or playing at love, and sinking. **Flowing** begins with the Trinity. It implies participation and

38

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- reciprocal relationship. Mechthild's soul and the souls and bodies of all humans flow forth from the depths of God as an image of the Trinity, and their destiny is to return to where they were created. Like Hadewijch, Mechthild emphasized the exemplary or preexistent reality of the soul in the Trinity. By virtue of giving birth to the Savior and suckling him, Mary has an essential role in the council of the Trinity. In Mechthild's view it was not sin that demanded the Incarnation; it was a part of God's eternal plan. The full understanding of the "flowing" of the Trinity outside itself into created reality and salvation as part of the eternal plan caused Mechthild to be critical of the contemporary church and its clergy.

39

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- **Courting and love play.** Mechthild does not have as strong an element of it as Hadewijch, but she too represents the *Minnemystik* or "courtly mysticism" current among Beguines. The term *minne* is pervasive in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. She, too, uses *minne* in a variety of ways—personification of Lady Love, love as an active force by which we participate in and return to God, and as a lover herself. She did not filter her understanding of love, however, with the Song of Songs but through her presentation of "the book of experience." She used very erotic language and ascribed it to the Trinity. She drew on language of sexual union especially to describe union with God. She, like Mary, was the bride of the Holy Trinity.

40

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- **Sinking.** Mechthild did not consider ecstatic union the ultimate goal. The closest form of union with God in this world rests instead in imitating God and Christ in “flowing down” or “sinking away” from ecstasy into pain, humility, and even estrangement from God. “If you want to have love,” she declared, “you must leave love” (2.23). She insisted on the dual roles of body and soul, somewhat like Hadewijch’s “living Jesus body and soul.” God consoled her “beyond the soul’s nobility” by letting her fall down into purgatory and be rejected in hell, for which God rewards her with heavenly joy.

41

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- After this came Constant Estrangement from God and enveloped the 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 chambermaid, 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.” (*Flowing Light* 4.12.)
- After being embraced by the Holy Trinity, the soul and body both began to sink down and cool. It is quite clear that her deepest love is the kenotic Christ, in whose saving action she participates.

42

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- She carries her cross on a sweet path
- When she truly surrenders herself to God in all sufferings.
- Her head is struck with a reed
- When one compares her great holiness to a fool.
- With the hammer of the strong love-pursuit she is nailed so fast to the cross
- That all creatures cannot call her back again.
- She hangs on the cross of sublime love,
- High in the air of the Holy Spirit,
- Facing the eternal sun of the living Godhead
- So that she becomes completely dry and bare of all earthly things.  
(*Flowing Light* 3.10.)
- Mechthild went on to portray the soul's participation in the resurrection and ascension, but she ended with a reminder that every soul filled with the love of God must suffer the passion.

43

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- VI. Marguerite Porete
  - The story of Marguerite Porete makes you realize how important separation of church and state is. Her execution on June 1, 1310 is the first documented case of an execution for mystical heresy in western Christianity, and it was not the last. Called a *pseudo-mulier*, "false woman," by the inquisitors, she evidently wrote the first version of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* in the 1290's. Between 1296 and 1306 it was condemned and ordered to be burned in her presence at Valenciennes by Bishop Guy II of Cambrai. She continued to disseminate it. In 1308 she was arrested and handed over to William Humbert, the Dominican Inquisitor of Paris. In 1310 a panel of twenty-one theologians examined the work and condemned fifteen propositions as heretical. The major charge was antinomianism as well as indifference to the church's mediation of salvation. A number of political factors entered into

44

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- her trial, in which she refused to cooperate, and condemnation—tension between Philip IV of France and the papacy, growing fear of heresy, etc. Despite the effort to destroy the work, it survived in six versions in four languages with thirteen manuscripts, evidence that it was one of the most widely circulated vernacular mystical texts in the high middle ages.
- A. Life
  - Little is known about Marguerite Porete’s life until her last years. She is said to have come from Hainaut in northern France, but her birthplace is unknown. Her high level of education and the way she conducted herself at the trial indicate an upper-class background. She may have spent some time with an enclosed Beguine group, but she practiced a wandering, mendicant style in her later years.

45

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- B. Writing
  - The full title of her work is *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and Those Who Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love*. The book is more didactic than the writings of Hadewijch and Mechthild, but it shares their use of the language of courtly love. Unlike them, too, she expressed hostility to visions and made no apology for being a woman. *The Mirror* claimed a “new form of the gospel” as its authority.

46

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

### – C. Mystical Theology

- 1. The subject of *The Mirror* is the process of mystical transformation. Marguerite tried to help believers discern what they must do to live a spiritually successful life. She outlined seven stages in the process: (1) The soul is touched by grace, stripped of her capacity for mortal sin, and commanded by God to love God with all her heart and her neighbor as herself. (2) The soul abandons self in the mortification of nature to accomplish the counsels of evangelical perfection. (3) An abundance of love results in works of perfection which sharpens the spirit of the soul and boils up in her, creating a desire to multiply her good works. (4) The soul is consumed in an ecstasy of love in which she is deceived into thinking that God has no greater gift in store for her, but divine love carries her higher, outside herself. (5) She ponders within the realization that God is Who is, from whom everything is, and that she is not, from whom no thing is. (6) The soul no

47

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- longer sees herself because of the abyss of humility into which she has fallen, but God sees Godself in her by God's divine majesty, which makes her soul transparent. (7) The last stage cannot be described and will be known only when the soul has left the body. As part of the framework, she envisions three kinds of "death" or transitions along the path—death to sin, death to nature, and death to the spirit. She also distinguishes two kinds of souls—the lost and the sad. The **lost** remain at the second stage. The **sad** remain in desire and will and practice the virtues of life in the spirit. Marguerite outlined traditional teaching about the Trinity, but her emphasis on the Holy Spirit as co-equal with the other two Persons permitted her to make radical statements about the kind of union with God the soul can experience in this life. In her understanding of the soul she distinguished between ability, intellect, and understanding; it is thus Trinitarian in nature and as such is the image of God.

48



## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- 2. This distinction of faculties enabled Marguerite to underscore the relation of love and knowledge in spiritual progress and to explore the dynamics of the soul's transformation and union with God. Love and knowledge remain in tension with each other and increase the capacity of the other for spiritual progress and for transformation and union. In the fifth stage the understanding of the soul is expanded. Then, the transformation of desirous love into divine love places the soul in the abyss of humility, the height of stage five. The soul is then lifted to the sixth stage where her understanding is transformed into divine understanding. In Marguerite's view union with God is a union of identity between the soul and God that occurs in

49

## 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> Century Women Mystics

- two moments, both grounded in her doctrine of the Trinity. Marguerite used two analogies for the union: iron heated in fire that becomes fire and river flowing into the sea that becomes the sea. The two-moment union is a union of identity of the soul with God in the divine threeness and oneness. In her schema the Holy Spirit provides the means by which the soul is transformed in a radical way. The soul doesn't merely become one spirit with God (as in Paul) but becomes God, who is three and one.

50